



The Marriage of Opposites

Alice Hoffman

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“A luminous, Marquez-esque tale” (*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 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 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.

“A work of art” (*Dallas Morning News*), *The Marriage of Opposites* showcases the beloved, bestselling Alice Hoffman at the height of her considerable powers. “Her lush, seductive prose, and heart-pounding subject...make this latest skinny-dip in enchanted realism...the Platonic ideal of the beach read” (*Slate.com*). Once forgotten to history, the marriage of Rachel and Frédéric “will only renew your commitment to Hoffman’s astonishing storytelling” (*USA TODAY*).

The Marriage of Opposites Details

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Author : Alice Hoffman

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From Reader Review *The Marriage of Opposites* for online ebook

Jen says

No doubt about it, Hoffman is a talented author. She's got a unique style and her stories are always so diverse. This one is no different. It is lavishly lyrical in spirits, visions and superstitions. She spins a story that is culturally rich with texture and history. It takes place in St. Thomas in the late 1800's and is split into 3 stories: Rachel, Jacobo and Lyddie. I adored Rachel's story - her 1st marriage, arranged to a man significantly older, determined her life and what it spanned to be. Jacobo and Lyddie's story, although interesting, is where my interest started to wain. Rachel's story was fascinating and I grew attached to the character. Then the story shifted and she was no longer the protagonist. I felt disconnected and a little frustrated as the story left me demanding to know more of Rachel's feelings and experiences. The rest of the novel just felt contrived and too long; or maybe I just felt it wasn't where I wanted it to be. Overall I rate it a 3.5★

Brina says

I had had *The Marriage of Opposites* on my radar for awhile, after savoring *Rules of Magic* and its sequel *Practical Magic* late last year. Magical realism has been my favorite genre since I transitioned to reading adult books during middle school- its been years to say the least- and I have found Alice Hoffman's books to be full of magical occurrences that make ordinary days vibrant. I have also been fond of impressionist art since my childhood of going to the Art Institute of Chicago and viewing the works of master artists. Needless to say, *The Marriage of Opposites* appeared to contain many facets that made it a book that I would savor. I proposed this book as a buddy read and found two groups of ladies happy to join me, in the groups reading for pleasure and retro chapter chicks, both here on goodreads (check them out). What followed was a tale of descriptive island life followed by heightened discussions.

Rachel Pomie grew up on the island of St Thomas during the early 1800s when Jews and Blacks enjoyed full rights granted to them by the Danish government. Despite being able to practice their religion freely, groups did not intermix. Most well to do people still kept housekeepers in their homes, and, while they developed friendships inside the home, it was looked down upon by society as a whole if they mixed in public. Rachel's father Moses Monsanto Pomie escaped to St Thomas in a manner similar to that of his biblical namesake. Carried to freedom in a basket by his able servant Enrique, Moses moved his family along with their family apple tree from San Domingue to St Thomas amidst calls for a revolution and rioting. It was in the relative safety of St Thomas that the Pomie family flourished as traders and local business men and became pillars of the island's Jewish community.

Women, however, were still considered property of both their fathers and husbands. Rachel Pomie was the sole surviving child of her parents Moses and Sara, and her father was determined to teach her as he would a son. Rachel learned how to balance account books as well as to converse in Dutch, French, Spanish, German, and English. This angered her mother, who had always desired a male heir, having lost a boy in infancy, and lead to a rivalry between the two women that would last a lifetime. Rachel found solace in reading fairytales by Charles Perrault as well as writing her own stories in a notebook that she kept hidden from her mother. She explored the island alongside her only and closest friend Jestine, the daughter of family housekeeper Adelle, and the two girls grew up like sisters. While their relationship, as well as any interracial relationship was frowned upon by most islanders, Moses Pomie was color blind when it came to race. As such, Rachel

and Jestine grew up as sisters through their ups and downs and learned every inch of their vibrant island home, and swore to each other that one day they would live in the fairytale city of Paris.

When it came time to marry, Rachel married a widower Isaac Petit in order to expand on the family business; however, it was not a match of love as Isaac favored his deceased wife Esther. Rachel called upon the spirit of Esther in order to help her through trying times and became a loving step mother to Esther's three surviving children as well as the four children she had with Isaac. Yet it was not a love match, and Adelle, who Rachel viewed as a mother, insured Rachel that she would fall in love, and she would know instantly when it happened. This love match occurs when Isaac passes away and his nephew Frederic Pizarro arrives from France to take over the family business. The two are smitten with each other even though the Jewish community calls the relationship incest, Rachel and Frederic carry on as though it's nobody's business but their own. After years, the scandal blows over, and the two go on to have four more children, including Abraham Jacobo Camille Pizarro, the father of French impressionistic art.

Hoffman vibrantly describes both St Thomas island life as well as Paris so that the reader feels as though they are there. She uses colors and textures to enrich the prose which includes ample references to St Thomas food and culture as well as Camille Pizarro's paintings down to the most minute details. Yet, what takes this novel to new heights is the use of magical realism, especially in the sections of the book that occur in St Thomas. Apple trees produce fruit whose taste mirrors the family mood, birds live as long as humans and become messengers of good news and protectors of fates, and Rachel and Jestine in their childhood adventures discover the place where sea turtles lay and hatch their eggs on their march to the sea and develop a turtle-woman who can not decide if her place is in the sea or on land, and remains as poignant symbolism throughout the duration of the novel.

Besides the vibrant island culture and bright life of mid 19th century Paris, Hoffman's text is full of mature talking points that make this novel ripe for book discussion groups. With the rights granted to all people on St Thomas, many interracial romances occur, including those denounced by the majority of the island. Yet, Adelle says love is love and should be color blind. Hoffman weaves these characters' stories into the text flawlessly, and these scorned love matches occur for nearly every couple in the novel. Then there is conflict between parents and children, religious practices and modernism, and the contrast between St Thomas and Paris and their societies and how all of these locales affect Camille Pizarro's art. With descriptive prose full of color, *The Marriage of Opposites* became a quick, vacation, beach read yet also a novel full of discussion talking points. Suffice it to say, this will not be the last time that I suggest to my friends at reading for pleasure and retro chapter chills that we read one of Ms. Hoffman's vibrant novels.

4 shiny stars

Chrissie says

After 1/3:

I am thoroughly enjoying myself! Vibrant colors, island life, folklore and history all rolled into one. Real life characters that draw you in. Physical attraction and love.

In conclusion:

I totally loved this book. Every aspect of it. Life on the island of St. Thomas (one of the American Virgin Islands) pulled me in and kept a tight grip on me, from the first page to the last, even the epilogue. I was engaged emotionally and intellectually. I breathed the air of the island, saw the colors and came to intimately understand life there. History is told through the people we meet, so we care. I looked at pictures of the island but they didn't come close to capturing the atmosphere of the place. The time period is the 1800s. After reading this book I feel like I have been there for a l-o-n-g stay, and yet my feet have never touched that soil. I came to understand its delights and its restrictions. Race and religion and social standards all intertwine. Alice Hoffman clearly knows that different places have different lights, sounds, smells.

You have certainly heard of the famed father of the Impressionist Movement - Camille Pissarro. He was born there, in 1830. His mother in 1795. She mothered eleven children. A twelfth was buried unnamed. You start by learning about his mother's life. This is interesting, engaging and movingly told. You have to understand her story to understand her son's. To understand his art you must understand him. The book is so wonderful because it captures family relationships amazingly well. It captures how those we love are also those we hurt. Love isn't easy. The author knows people, and her lines beautifully capture how we hurt, love, tease, entice and question each other.

The book covers what has shaped the artist - his family relationships. It is not a book that follows his artistic life, his paintings, his adult years in France. That is for a biographer. There is a lengthy sojourn in Paris though, his years spent at school.

The audiobook is narrated by four. Tina Benko tells the mother's story. She was my favorite. I utterly adored her husky voice. Santino Fontana is the young Camille. Gloria Reuben is the book's narrator. Finally Alice Hoffman, the author, follows with the epilogue. All do an excellent job. Each captured the feel of the lines being read.

Karen says

I thoroughly enjoyed this novel, while reading it I did not know it was based on a true story.

I loved Rachel and the parts of the story centered on her the most.

I really enjoyed all the parts that took place on St Thomas, and the mysticism incorporated into this novel.

Diane says

One of A Hoffman's best writings...which deals with the history of a mother who could not handle her daughter's stubbornness and insight to learn everything about life and the love she had for her father..this was more of a period piece/era storyline that the author wrote telling us the readers about what took place back in those days like the 1800s..while her educated daughter was forced to marry this older man twice her age,who himself already had a wife(polygamy)..an incredible well written story as seen in the eyes of today's world/society..

Michael says

This family saga about the life of Camille Pissarro's mother evokes a great sense of place for the West Indies island of St. Thomas as a site of intersection of race, culture, class, and religion in the early 19th century. In the tradition of the line of Hoffman novels I have sampled so far, she excels here in storytelling and character development. It is unusual for her to focus on breathing life into historical figures, achieved with much imagination based on skeletal facts provided in the afterward.

Hoffman imagines the wonders and challenges of Rachel Pomie's childhood in a loving family of Jewish shopkeepers, well connected to the rich tropical environment and to a community formed of many cultures. A Danish colony at the time, the island was a haven for diversity after the king at the end of the 18th century abolished slave trading and established religious freedoms. Hence, the immigration of her parents from Santo Domingo where her grandparents had moved from France. Rachel gets the benefit of cohesion in the Jewish community, but pushes at the boundaries of their constraining traditions as well as broad social norms about the roles of women and the privileges associated with class and race. For example, she forms lifelong close friendship with a black girl, Jestine, and soaks up much of her love of nature and spiritual perspectives. She sneaks out at night with her to marvel in the annual landing of sea turtles for egg-laying and learns from her many folktales and herbal remedies. She learns enough arithmetic and reading to help out with managing her father's store. She dreams of going to Paris and is envious that an adoptive brother, Aaron, is sent there when he inappropriately falls for Jestine.

Rachel's childhood ends abruptly with an arranged marriage to an older French Jewish widower with three children. She soldiered on in this loveless, but respectful, marriage, and together produce three more children before he dies and leaves her at 29 years old to struggle with managing a large family and business in tough economic straits. These events are largely a backdrop to the main story of this novel, her relationship with the 22-year-old nephew of her dead husband sent from Paris by the family to direct the business, Frederic Pissarro (spelled from the Portuguese as "Pizzarro"). Women were not allowed to inherit property, so there is much resentment to overcome at first. Hoffman renders a wonderful love story out of their chemistry and the path it leads them to defy Jewish laws forbidding marriage between an aunt and nephew regardless of absence of blood relations. Because of their banishment from the synagogue, they have to sustain a long period of cultural and social isolation.

As another consequence, the son they produce, Jacobo Camille, does not attend Hebrew school, but instead goes to a Protestant school for people of color run by Moravian missionaries from Denmark. No one knows where artistic genius comes from, but the portrait of Camille's early life makes a great attempt to account for the roots and influences on his visionary talents, appreciation of colors and natural forms, and respect for common people and diverse cultures. A big core of his heritage lies in the personality of Rachel herself, and like Rachel did with her own mother, he defies her plans for his life, which in his case includes taking over the family business and pursuing art. His ability to listen with empathy ends up with people sharing dark secrets with him and thereby allows him to heal major relationship breaches that oppress the lives of his parents and, later, that of his mother's friend Jestine.

The story has a lovely ending, one which involves Rachel getting to experience the beginning of Camille's success in his artistic career in Paris. It was satisfying to see Hoffman pull all the threads of this novel into such a fine tapestry of life.

The book was provided by the publisher as an e-book through the NetGalley program and expected to be published in August. I wish I could have quoted some of my favorite lyrical passages and rich metaphors in

Hoffman's prose, but the publisher requests reviewers not to do so due to the potential editorial changes.

Candi says

"Then I understood that when someone begins to tell you her story, you are entwined together."

This quote is much like the way I felt after reading this excellent novel. Rachel Pomié Petit Pizarro shared her story and that of her son, the renowned Impressionist painter, Camille Pissarro. For a time, I was completely wrapped up in their lives and immersed in the vibrant colors and rich history of the island of St. Thomas. Books like this are the reason why historical fiction remains one of my favorite genres of writing. This is historical fiction at its finest – not just a recounting of historical events, but a telling of a story filled with strong characters, vivid descriptions, beautiful prose, family dynamics, and rich culture. The historical details were fascinating and woven throughout the narrative in a way that made it a pleasure to learn and read. Alice Hoffman includes island folklore, superstitions, and a splash of magical realism in her novel which adds another wonderful layer to the whole experience. She never went overboard in this book; never made me shake my head in disbelief. It was all part of the culture of the island and thus felt natural and true to the life of this exotic location.

Rachel was a dreamer; she was strong-willed even as a young girl. She was of Jewish heritage and the story of her parents and their ancestors was one of flight and escape from persecution. They settled on this island to make a life where they could practice their faith without fear. But it was in Rachel's blood, that desire to strike out and explore the world. She wanted to see Paris. She wanted to break free from her mother, a woman filled with bitterness.

"Heat was at the core of our lives, a shape-shifter that never was too far from the door. It made me want to step out of my clothes and dive into another life, one where there were linden trees and green lawns, where women wore black silk dresses and crinolines that rustled when they walked, a country where the moon rose like a silver disc into a cold, clear sky."

Of course, living in St. Thomas during the early 1800s, women didn't have the freedom to do as they wished. Education in a school was not even an option for a young girl. Her father's library was a lifesaver and the place where Rachel grew to understand more of the world. Her father taught her the basics of the family business. She befriended their cook's daughter, Jestine, a girl of mixed blood – her mother is of African descent, and her father is unnamed but likely a member of her own community. This broadened her world further; now she saw life from the different perspectives of the island's various and colorful inhabitants. But, as fate would have it, Rachel needed to step up and show her practical side in order to save her father's business from ruin. She did just this but never truly abandoned her dreams completely.

Mixed within this historical novel was also a beautiful love story - one that didn't detract from the novel's sophistication but instead added to it. A scandal arose in Rachel's faith community when she fell in love with a young man. Their relationship was strictly forbidden, yet this determined woman would not listen to 'reason' and instead listened to her heart. *"His presence was like a spell, his name an incantation."* What followed was heartache but also much joy. Here we finally meet Camille Pizarro (later changed to Pissarro) and are witness to the growth of a remarkable and gifted artist. The tragedy was that Camille was perhaps much like his mother in her youth, and yet as is often the case in parent-child relationships, there is the sting of disapproval for one trying to live outside the conventions of society. I am not creative; I don't have a

single artistic bone in my body, yet I adore watching and reading of the creative process. It is done so well here. Hoffman manages to make us feel for Camille and root for him in his longing to express himself through his painting. He was seen as an oddity in the community, and Rachel tried to stifle his talents. *"We're likely to see our children as we wish to, not as they are."* Like his mother before him, Camille felt constricted in the closed community of the island. He wished to escape as well, to find the freedom to express himself. He skipped school to practice his art and to explore the rest of the island. He watched the boats from faraway lands come into the harbor; he mingled with the people of color, learned their stories, and painted their portraits. *"Flesh tones didn't show the real substance of people, neither their physical aspects nor their souls."*

Eventually, we have the opportunity to travel to Paris and see it from the eyes of this artist. I loved those scenes as well. I could go on and on about this book, but I'm going to stop myself here. This book is full of emotions, colors, mother-child relationships, love, meaningful friendships, grief, and artistry. I so enjoyed learning of the lives of such compelling characters. I may not always have agreed with Rachel's decisions and actions, especially as a mother, but Hoffman managed to make me understand her nevertheless. I already knew mother-daughter bonds could be tricky, but I didn't quite imagine mother-son relationships to be equally complicated; and I have experience with both! I adored the only other book I've read by this author – **The Dovekeepers**, but I loved this even more. Highly recommended.

"Love him more, not less."

Angela M says

A work of historical fiction written by Alice Hoffman was all I needed to know and I was immediately interested in reading this book . I loved the Dovekeepers and while they are very different stories , Hoffman's lyrical writing and story telling had me fully engaged in this family saga. I have to admit that I did not know much at all about the artist , Camille Pissaro, and certainly nothing about his mother or his early life in St. Thomas or later in Paris .

I couldn't help but love Rachel , who defies the conventions of what a young Jewish girl in the early 1800's should be doing - by loving the books in her father's library and writing stories . Her family settled in St . Thomas as a result of the religious persecution of the Inquisition . While the later part of the book focuses on her artist son , the story belongs to the independent and headstrong Rachel but we also see in Camille the same traits .

In addition to the skillful way that Hoffman develops the character of Rachel , she has also drawn a whole cast of characters from Rachel's mother and father to the boy that her family adopts to her best friend Jestine whose mother is a servant in their home to Rachel's husbands . There are a number of characters whose lives are connected and there are a few secrets that are divulged towards the end of the story revealing things about them that we did not know earlier in the book and some things that they did not know that changed their fates .

In addition to these interesting characters , there are spirits, and an herbal healer and a woman who foresees the future . None of this overtook the reality of the multiple love stories ,all beautiful and some heartbreaking , the reality of the religious and racial issues. Then there is the gorgeous descriptions of St, Thomas that allow you to almost see the blue of the ocean and smell the flowers .

Hoffman tells us that she has kept close to the facts of Rachel Pizarro's life, but that the characters outside of her family, friends and neighbors are her invention. All I can say is that she has skillfully woven these characters into the real story making for a story that held me from beginning to end in spite of a being a little slow moving at times. Thus 4 instead of 5 stars, but highly recommended.

Thanks to Simon and Shuster and Edelweiss

Diane S ? says

Reading about a place I have been is always special. Of course, I wasn't in St. Thomas in the mid nineteenth century but some of the plant life and wildlife remains the same. Hoffman and her new passion for writing about historical characters takes on the mother and her son, Camille, many thought to be the father of impressionism. She also seems to gravitate to strong women and Rachel certainly was that and more. Her ability to bring to life characters, time and place, as well as her descriptive power to bring the colors and sounds of St. Thomas to the forefront, allow the reader to immerse themselves in the story.. Also realtes the political force and the hatred of Jews that led them to St. Thomas. Here they would form their own society, a society that would for some portion of her life, condemn Rachel and her growing family as well as her new husband.

Loved the character of Rachel, she was amazing. A woman out of time who defied many in her quest to be true to herself. At one point Camille goes to Paris and I loved that part of the story as well. Rachel's best friend, a negro who she was raised with, Justeen, has her own remarkable tale to tell. She becomes a second mother to Camille. As a seamstress she understand his desire for colors, beautiful colors and muted colors, any colors at all. It is too a story about the relationship between a mother and son.

There is some magical realism in this story, as well as much folklore. Some wonderful secondary characters each with their own backstory. Having read Hoffman for years I love her new foray into historical happenings, but I miss her stories of whimsy. Would like to see her write another of those. Still a wonderful, if a tad long, story.

ARC from NetGalley.

Elyse says

I thought the "Dovekeepers" was absolutely a fantastic book.....

Yet... For some reason...I thought "The Marriage of Opposites", was going to be a much more straight forward simple story, one that was even familiar to me. Simple.. Sweet historical love story. I was wrong... nothing was 'simple'. There was 'love'... but I was reminded ... How complicated love can be.

It's been a very long time since I've cried --bawling-- after completing a book. I literally set my Kindle down, closed it and cried and cried. Later, my husband came home... and he was kind to sit with me for about an hour while I shared to him the story -- as I tried to understand my own tears..... because I really don't think most people will cry at all.

I absolutely love Alice Hoffman, more and more. She 'really' is a master storyteller! I think Hoffman is becoming my new hero! Boy... I sure wish I could meet her!

I'm really speechless... still in tears. I'm not sure if it's because I'm Jewish or not... But what I was crying to... is my own Jewish History.

This story was 'not' about thousands of Jews being killed, it was not a war story yet in some ways this story was just as painful to me as if it were

When mothers are too critical of their sons and daughters, many other people suffer and many generations continue to suffer.

I felt sad that rules we're often too constricting for characters in this novel. It's strange, but I also felt sad when rules were not kept, because I understood the pain it was also. When religions become tribal....people are going to get hurt.

Rachel is a dominant character in the story, and even when she was being unreasonable, being mean, critical to her son (the famous painter), often like her mother was to her

I could still feel, and see, that she loved her son deeply. Her pride blocked her own expression of love.

I'll never forget this story. I just wish that in 2015... we might learn something.... in some ways...life does not look much different today than it did in the 1800's Other than most of us do not have 11 children. lol

Beautiful - powerful- difference making novel for me!!!!

Thank you - with all my heart to the publisher- Netgalley- and Alice Hoffman for the opportunity to read and share my thoughts about this book!

Jenna says

4.5 Stars

I've been approved twice for early copies of Alice Hoffman's books and both times I nearly did cartwheels around my house. I am a fairly new fan of Hoffman's but what I have read swept me away into new dimensions. I honestly lose my bearings once I open the pages of her books- it's as if a gentle hand lifts from the pages and guides me into a new and magical world.

"The Marriage of Opposites" was no exception. Although it took me a chapter to really get a feel for where the book was taking me, it most definitely didn't disappoint. I will say that there was less of a magical theme, or less than normal, but the storylines were so engaging that I was mesmerized just the same.

There were various timelines (all linear) and the story shifted points-of-view depending on the character but everything revolved around a woman, Rachel Pomié (Petit Pizarro), and those closest to her. The stories took place primarily in St. Thomas and Paris. Hoffman was successful in turning the atmosphere in St. Thomas to one that was vibrant and magical and I could even smell the salt from the water and hear the water lapping over the sand. Once in Paris it was as though my bones felt cold just reading about the brutal winters.

What impressed me most was how the characters were so developed that Hoffman didn't skip even the smallest nuances in their personalities as life and experiences slowly molded each personality and left them

far from generalized.

I tend to write less what the book is about in my reviews and more of my experience as I don't like to give too much away, but I will say that I highly recommend this book.

I would like to thank NetGalley, Simon & Schuster, and the author for an advanced copy for an honest review.

Cathrine ?? says

4.5★

This is a completely biased and prejudicial review from an avowed Alice Hoffman fan.

She describes “purple air smelling of hyacinths”, a blue eyed woman “whose soul was as quiet as snow”, and a dress made from dyes of heron and midnight blues, with pale lilac so flowerlike “that bees rumbled nearby” then sewn from threads “spun in China, carried overland through the desert on the backs of camels and then sailed across the ocean from Portugal.”

And how is it that I have never seen a Camille Pissarro painting? A man she described as the father figure of impressionism and mentor to Monet and Degas. I had to stop early in the book and look at his paintings, then towards the end I watched a slideshow of over 800 of them. I am going to drink some wine and watch the slideshow again. If I had not already read most of her books I would have thought her prose was inspired by his work. It probably was but the fact is she has always painted with her words. I get lost in them. Truly, I travel somewhere else when I get into one of her books. Sighs have escaped me when I finish the final chapters.

This is fiction based on facts and mostly about the life, loves, and dreams of his mother Rachel. Enlightening, imaginative, interesting, and yes, magical.

PorshaJo says

Reading *The Marriage of Opposites* really made me think....*The Rules of Magic* is my favorite Alice Hoffman book, but have I found a new favorite? Oh yes, it is my new favorite as I adored this book. One of the things I love about Hoffman's books is that each one is so different. Yes, she has a running theme in many of her books and this one was no different....the color red, red haired women, birds, and of course, love (no magical realism in here, but not missed). But the stories she weaves are so unique and varied but utterly captivating.

The Marriage of Opposites is the story of Rachel Pissarro, growing up on the island of St. Thomas in the early 1800's. I enjoy visiting St. Thomas and seeing the land (though I'm more partial to Tortola right across the water via ferry). I enjoyed hearing of the lush lands, the foods, and the people from so long ago. Rachel

was a strong young woman who spoke her mind and did what she wanted. Naturally, this ruffled many feathers in her community and within the Jewish families. Rachel was married to her father's business partner to help save the business, and so her epic life began. The story moves back and forth between St. Thomas and Paris, France where Rachel has longed to visit. There are many rules of marriage and that of opposites is forbidden. But that does not stop Rachel. Eventually when her husband dies, she marries his nephew who is sent to the island to take over the business. And so begins the love affair that lasts many years to come. Though they are shunned due to this forbidden marriage. But Rachel does not care. She gives birth to many children, but one in particular is focused on. That is Camille Pissarro, the Father of Impressionism. One of the wonderful things of this book is that it's part true story, and part fiction. Camille was a real person, a very well known painter in France, and his mother was Rachel, who gave birth to many children. Hoffman weaves this true tale but adding in more details of their lives. This is quite the family saga drawn over many years and many people.

I listened to the audio version of this which added to the beauty of this book. The narrators were wonderful, switching between the voice of Rachel, Camille, and a 'narrator' telling this amazing story. If you can't tell by now, I loved this book. I'm so glad that I finally read it and will tell any Hoffman fan to pick this one up. I just need to figure out which Hoffman book to follow up with now. I think that is a tall order to fill.

Diane Wallace says

One of A.Hoffman's best writings..great to see her going back in time telling us all about what was happening back then: like a spiteful,mean and nasty mother... while her educated daughter was forced to get married to an older man who already had another wife(polygamy)...all this was taking place in the 1800s and is still happening today..it's an incredible story that was well written because of the pattern of today's world/society..

Iris P says

WARNING MY REVIEW CONTAINS PLENTY OF SPOILERS!

The Marriage of Opposites

op-po-site ?äp?z?t/

noun plural noun: opposites

a person or thing that is totally different from or the reverse of someone or something else.

"My father had told me that no matter how comfortable we might feel, we must live like fish, unattached to any land. Wherever there was water, we would survive. Some fish could stay in the mud for months, even years, and when at last there was a high flooding tide, they would swim away, a dark flash, remembered only by their own kind. So perhaps the stories they told of our people were true: no net could hold us."

Rachel Pomie

At its very best historical fiction manages not only to sketch an accurate picture of the past, it also provides the reader with a sense of its characters's worldviews, their values and traditions, and the general sensibilities that hopefully reflect the true essence and spirit of the era.

The Marriage of Opposites is based on the true life of Rachel Pomie Petit Pizarro, who was born in the island of St Thomas in 1795. She is better known as the mother of Camille Pissarro, a renowned painter that would become one of the fathers of the French Impressionism movement.

Alice Hoffman uses four narrative voices in the book, the first few chapters are told from Rachel's perspectives. Later chapters are told from the perspective of Rachel's second husband, her son, and her best friend's daughter.

Rachel's grandparents had long ago fled France who, after living in St. Domingue (what is now Haiti in the island of Hispaniola), ended up moving to St. Thomas, an island that by virtue of an edict proclaimed by the King of Denmark in 1754 allowed Jews to become citizens and to freely practice their religion.

St Thomas and Paris during the 1800's, the geographical settings of this novel, couldn't have been more different. The very natural but rudimentary beauty of the New World is juxtaposed against the more polished, sophisticated culture of the Old.

This is the first one of many "opposite" narratives that are part of the stories told in this vivid, enchanted novel.

Most of the relationships are depicted within a frame of contrasts: people that come from different cultures, religions, races and social statuses: Free man & slaves, mothers & sons, men & women, husband and wives.

Even since the times of colonization, The Caribbean islands have represented the blending of two major cultures, Africa & Europe. Perhaps more than in any other place in the Americas, this region is a product of its history and its geography.

Initially colonized by the Dutch, St Thomas which is now part of the US Virgin Islands, was later on conquered by the Danish.

The island's economy became dependent on sugar plantations which in turn relied on slave labor and the slave trade.

A Colonial Map of Saint Thomas

One of the many topics explored in The Marriage of Opposites is the complicated relationship between the island's European settlers and the descendants of African slaves.

With its multicultural, multilingual population, Charlotte Amalie, the capital of St. Thomas, must have sounded like a small-scale version of Babel. French was the language spoken by most citizens, but many also spoke English, Spanish and Portuguese.

By 1796, a small Sephardic Jewish community had settled in the island. Fleeing Spain and Portugal from religious persecution, they set roots and prospered in this tiny island nation. They also founded the Beracha Veshalom Vegmiluth Hasidim, a synagogue that is considered to this day, the oldest continuous-use synagogue on American territory.

Freedom, and more specifically freedom of religion, is another complex issue that is examined on this novel.

By the early 19th century, the indigenous people of the Caribbean had long ago been eradicated at the hands of the European conquistadors. But now, in addition to the slaves of African descent that lived in the island, the Jews are another group of people that have come fleeing persecution and who themselves had been slaves earlier in their history.

The Beracha Veshalom Hasadim Synagogue in St Thomas

I thought *The Marriage of Opposites* was a wonderful work of historic storytelling, but the novel also incorporates captivating fairy tales, fables and allegories.

There are stories of talking parrots, a turtle-girl who is "*half human, with a human face and soul*", an apple tree that seems to live forever and a synagogue "*made of stone, molasses and sand*". (This last one apparently not so much a myth but a real combination of ingredients used by Sephardic Jews to hold bricks together, the sand floors were used to muffle the sound of prayer).

Alice Hoffman crosses the lines between reality and the supernatural so flawlessly that at times is difficult to determine what parts of the story are intended to read as magic and what parts are presented as purely symbolic.

There seems to be a very small amount of known facts about the life of the real Rachel Pomie, but the author uses her fantastic imagination to recreate her as a strong-willed, sharp-tongued, passionate woman who refuses to abide by the racial or gender conventions of her times. I absolutely loved Rachel's deep sense of individuality and her resolution to create her own destiny.

Like many islanders, Rachel both loves her surroundings and feels trapped by them. She buries herself in her father's library, reading voraciously and memorizing maps of Paris, the city she dreams will one day become her permanent home.

As an only child she finds in Jestine, the daughter of the Pomie's cook, Adelle, a sisterly connection that will last throughout their lifetimes.

Rachel and Jestine spent endless hours leisurely exploring the island and dreaming of one day going to Paris together.

But their plans are quickly derailed after Rachel's father arranges for her to marriage Isaac, a 44 years widow and the father of three small children. The purpose of their union is to help with the family's struggling business.

Rachel doesn't love her husband, but she adores his children, and she and Isaac have four more together.

When Isaac suddenly dies, Rachel finds herself without a home or livelihood and with 7 children to provide for and another one in the way.

At a time when women didn't have any rights, not even over their own children, she's not allowed to run the family business even though she is perfectly capable of doing so.

Enter Frederick Pizzarro, Isaac's handsome much younger nephew, who has come to settle the family's estate.

When the 22 year-old Pizzarro goes to meet his uncle's widow, he's expecting to find an old lady, instead he catches sight of Rachel Pomie, only 30, in her white shift.

He felt he *"was seeing a secret, a vision granted only to a few. He could feel his desire as she glances at him ... The things he wished to do to this woman, he could not have brought himself to say aloud."*

This would definitely not be a marriage of convenience!

Frederick is a fair-minded, diligent young man who is as smitten by the beauty of the island as he is by Rachel's passion for life and indomitable spirit.

Shortly after the meet, Frederick and Rachel begin a passionate affair that sparks a scandal within their tight-knit Jewish community. Because Rachel is technically Frederick's aunt by marriage, their relationship is considered to be incestuous in nature.

The romance between Frederick and Rachel is one for the ages, but they will pay a high price for it: they are shunned for years by their community, denied the right to get married and their younger sons are forced to attend a Christian school where they are the only Caucasian and Jewish children.

It's purely through sheer determination that Rachel and Frederick would get married. They'd have to wait for almost a decade before their congregation recognizes the legitimacy of their marriage and the 4 children they had together.

Pissarro- Flowering Plum Tree Eragny (1894)

The novel also follows the parallel story of Justine who at a very young age experienced her own story of "forbidden love". She falls madly in love with Aaron, the Pomie's spoiled adopted son, but their interracial romance is also frowned upon by their society so after it's discovered, Aaron is sent to live in France. Justine soon learns she is pregnant, this daughter would be stolen from her when Aaron's wife learns she is unable to bear children.

The third one of Frederick and Rachel's children was Jacob Abraham Camille Pissarro.

The second half of the novel, which I found much less interesting, is mostly told from Camille's point of view. It follows him throughout his life as he travels to Europe and South America, returns to St. Thomas only to be extremely miserable there, and ultimately goes back to France where he becomes a prominent figure within the art circles of the times.

Pissarro - Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas-(1856)

Pissarro, who lost his first name and changed the spelling of his last name after permanently settling in France, would become friends with Cezanne and have an important influence on the likes of Gauguin, Renoir & Vincent Van Gogh.

Camille Pissarro and his wife, Julie Vellay, 1877, Pontoise, France

Rachel and Camille's relationship is difficult, and one that seemed to fit into the "opposites" narrative of the novel. As a man, Camille is able to achieve many of the goals that Rachel is denied to pursue.

Rachel tries to control his son and at least initially, does her best to discourage his intention to develop his artistic talents.

And just like it happened between Rachel and her own mother, the two of them clashed so frequently not because they are so different but because they are so similar.

As a young girl, Rachel used to collect and create stories about the island and write them down. She would hid these notebooks from her judgmental mother knowing she'd probably disapproved.

Years later, when dealing with her own children, she finds herself adopting a similar attitude, completely oblivious to the irony that now she's the unyielding mother, set on her ways to enforce rules she once considered stifling and arbitrary.

There seems to be a rule that dictates that every new generation is destined to inflict the same restrictions on their children that were once imposed on them.

Quite frequently those children suffer from these often misguided, if well-intentioned, protections. But inevitably, they will turn their backs on their parents's mandates, build their own destinies, and become their own storytellers.

I learned a lot while reading this novel, starting with getting to know Camille Pissarro, a amazing artist I hadn't heard of before.

The novel's exploration on the topics of religious intolerance, racism and, of course, sexism sounds eerily familiar and as relevant today as ever.

The Marriage of Opposites is a beautifully love story, one that I would highly recommend.
