

Incantation

by Alice Hoffman

Little, Brown and Company

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Ardis Francoeur
Watertown Public Library, Watertown, MA

Massachusetts
Award Winner
2007



SUMMARY:

Estrella's family is a close one, with special names they use for each other in private, and special family traditions they hold dear. Estrella is in awe of her beautiful mother who is a healer, proud of her brother who is training to be a priest, and respectful of her wise grandfather and stern grandmother. They're just like any other family in their small Spanish town of Encaleflora.

Bit by bit, however, Estrella realizes that the deMadrigal family isn't quite like their neighbors: they don't eat the traditional pork sausage, chorizo; they don't go to the same church; and they speak a different language at home, Ladino, a mix of Spanish and Hebrew.

Not everyone treasures these differences as Estrella does: her grandfather is accused of sorcery and her mother of witchcraft. As her family becomes a target of hate and abuse, Estrella must decide if she can trust those she loves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. One theme in this book is the concept of never getting attached to one place and being able to flee in the event of danger. The deMadrigal family had lived in Encaleflora for more than five hundred years, yet still, Estrella and her grandmother were forced to leave in the end. The pilgrims (also forced to flee home countries because of religious persecution) came to America in 1620, less than 400 years ago. Do you think that what happened to the Jewish families in Encaleflora could happen here? Do you think it's possible for the Jewish people to ever truly escape persecution?
2. On that same theme of religious persecution and transience, can you think of any similar modern events that mirror those events in the book?
3. Estrella's family hid their true religious beliefs from her for years, do you agree that keeping this secret was the right thing to do?
4. Do you think that Catalina will ever feel remorse for betraying the deMadrigal family?

ACTIVITIES

1. Research your own family history; most American families are originally from other countries. Where did your family come from and how long have they been in this country?
2. Estrella's family cooked traditional dishes like rice with saffron and olive oil and a pudding made with milk and almonds. Does your family have any traditional meals?
3. Make saffron rice:

1 1/2 cups long grain white rice (basmati is great)
3 cups water
1 teaspoon saffron threads, crushed
1/4 stick butter
salt
tiny pinch of powdered ginger or cinnamon (optional)
golden raisins and toasted pine nuts, sliced almonds, or pecans (optional)*
olive oil*
salt and pepper

1. In a large, lidded sauce pan, bring water to a boil. Add saffron and turn heat down to medium-low. Allow saffron to steep for 5-10 minutes, until the water is a beautiful golden-orange color.

2. Add rice, butter and spice. Return to boil. Cover pot and turn heat down to low. Simmer for 20 minutes without stirring. Fluff with a fork, add salt to taste, and serve immediately. Garnish with raisins and nuts if desired.

* If desired, saute pine nuts in 2 tablespoons of olive oil until slightly browned - do not overcook.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (Excerpted from: <http://www.alicehoffman.com>)

Alice Hoffman was born in New York City on March 16, 1952 and grew up on Long Island. After graduating from high school in 1969, she attended Adelphi University, from which she received a BA, and then received a Mirrellees Fellowship to the Stanford University Creative Writing Center, which she attended in 1973 and 74, receiving an MA in creative writing. She currently lives in Boston and New York.

Hoffman's first novel, *Property Of*, was written at the age of twenty-one, while she was studying at Stanford, and published shortly thereafter by Farrar Straus and Giroux. She credits her mentor, professor and writer Albert J. Guerard, and his wife, the writer Maclin Bocoock Guerard, for helping her to publish her first short story in the magazine *Fiction*. Editor Ted Solotaroff then contacted her to ask if she had a novel, at which point she quickly began to write what was to become *Property Of*, a section of which was published in Mr. Solotaroff's magazine, *American Review*.

Since that remarkable beginning, Alice Hoffman has become one of our most distinguished novelists. She has published a total of sixteen novels, two books of short fiction, and eight books for children and young adults. Her work has been published in more than twenty translations and more than one hundred foreign editions. Her novels have received mention as notable books of the year by *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Library Journal*, and *People Magazine*. She has also worked as a screenwriter and is the author of the original screenplay “Independence Day,” a film starring Kathleen Quinlan and Diane Weist. Her short fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Kenyon Review*, *Redbook*, *Architectural Digest*, *Gourmet*, *Self*, and other magazines. Her teen novel *Aquamarine*, was recently made into a film starring Emma Roberts.

HELPFUL LINKS

Alice Hoffman’s Official Website: <http://www.alicehoffman.com/>

History of Jews in Spain- a Timeline:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/8636/History.html>

Spanish-Jewish Chronology: http://sefarad.rediris.es/english/cronologia_english.htm

A Quick Explanation of Ladino: <http://www.sephardicstudies.org/quickladino.html>

OTHER BOOKS YOU MIGHT LIKE

A Break With Charity, Ann Rinaldi

Coffin Quilt, Ann Rinaldi

Devil on My Heels, Joyce McDonald

The Upstairs Room, Johanna Reiss



The Massachusetts Book Awards are a program of the Massachusetts Center for the Book, the Commonwealth Affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Visit us on the web at www.massbook.org.

Copyright © 2007 Massachusetts Center for the Book