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Come in...and be captivated...

For the autumn issue, it seemed fitting to interview a writer who turns the ordinary, with the mystical flick of her pen, into the extraordinary. Alice Hoffman is the author of *Here on Earth*, an Oprah's Book Club Selection, best-sellers *Practical Magic*, which was made into the Hollywood film starring Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman, and *Aquamarine*, also made into a Hollywood film, *The Ice Queen*, *Local Girls*, *Blackbird House*, and most recently, *Third Angel*- to name a few... Hoffman has the ability to examine everyday life and infuse it with the magic of vivid imagination. Her themes explore human psychology and the surreal, beneath-the-surface aspect of the world at large. Once having read her artful prose, the reader will forever see their environment through the fascinating veil of 'What if...'

Questions for Alice Hoffman Interview by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) In *Writers on Writing: Collected Essays from The New York Times*, you wrote, "Writers don't choose their craft; they need to write in order to face the world." This insightful observation reflects the deep passion true writers who eat, sleep and breathe the written word feel. When in your life did you realize that this was your soul's calling and how did this realization come about? How do you feel about writing now as opposed to when you first realized your dedication to this craft?

First I was a reader and for me everything came from that. Becoming a writer happened slowly; I never thought I would actually be able to become a writer... it seemed so far-fetched. But always I lived more fully in the world of fiction than in real time, and for me the classes I took in college and graduate school allowed me to believe I could in fact become a writer. Now I spend much more time in the writing world and so in

some ways it's easier to enter, in some ways it's still as difficult.

2) There are often common themes that arise in your novel and amongst your characters such as magic realism, the bond of sisterhood, redemption after deep and misunderstood pain, dangerous love, and individuals with beautiful qualities being isolated or persecuted for being different. What inspired you, whether from life or observations, to choose some of these themes and touch upon them so meaningfully?

I do think if you write for a long enough time, certain themes, the themes that consume you, arise again and again. For me it is love, loss, betrayal, redemption. Even when I don't know that is the inside of the story I'm writing, it's always there. I think most art is created from childhood issues and experience. I do think most writers tend to be people who feel isolated- they're observers, not in the action, but writing about it.

3) In *The Write Place At the Write Time*, we often write of coincidence and serendipity- hence the name of our publication. In your novel's film adaptation of *Practical Magic*, there is a wonderfully poignant scene in which the young Sally does a true love spell. This spell later manifests for her in the character of Gary Hallet. Can you give us an example of this kind of "magic" or serendipity in your own life?

My entire publishing and writing life has been magic, fate, kindness. I went to Stanford U writing program having never heard of Stanford, was given a fellowship, had an incredible mentor who sent a story to a friend of his, was published, had a letter from a great editor asking for a novel, wrote it in six months, sold it to FSG via my agent, who is still my agent 30 something years later. Pure luck and kindness.

4) In your latest novel, *Third Angel*, you lead the reader to believe that a supernatural presence is the cause of some of the disturbances in the story, yet you then make an important point in showing through Teddy Healy's character that sometimes it is only the ghosts of ourselves and our pasts that we must face. He reclaims his own innocence by giving young Lucy

Green's character hers. What prompted the switch in this story from emphasis on the supernatural which is prevalent in many of your works to emphasis on facing our own "demons" and re-examining the self, looking inward as opposed to reaching redemption through an outer circumstance?

I think being "Haunted" can mean many things- haunted by mistakes, by the past, by regret....

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.

5) In many of your novels, you paint a surreal portrait of the imaginative, dark, and often mystical qualities of New England. Nearly anyone who has ever lived in New England or spent extensive time there knows that this portrayal is not at all far from the truth, having captured the imaginations of authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King. What about New England, in your mind, allows you and inspires you to see it in this rich light? Does it lie in the area's history or is it more of an intangible feeling?

You're right- New England has such a huge literary tradition and that resonates for writers living here. I always think of myself as a New Yorker, but the brooding landscape and the literary tradition of New England seeped into my work during the time I've lived here.

Last Thoughts... In the interest of the autumn season, can you tell us about Practical Magic- book to screen adaptation, your creative input/involvement, your thoughts of the soundtrack, casting, locations used, your vision come to life, differences from the book and any magical anecdotes for good measure...?

For me, the screen version of Practical Magic was a near miss. The actors are so wonderful, and the set design so amazing, but alas I think it's what one friend called "The Tinker Toy Version"

of the book. Every bit of magic stuck out like a sore thumb and wasn't integrated into the whole fabric of the women's lives. There were three or more screenwriters and I had nothing to do with the script. It's always difficult to make art when it's not a single vision. I do think the book is much richer, more serious, more magical. For me the problem of the film can be seen in a single decision: Instead of filming in Salem, it was filmed on the lot in LA and in Washington State. The gritty truth of the story somehow was lost in the process. Still, I loved the actors, the music, the design... I just wished it had been taken to the next level.

We had the great pleasure this issue of interviewing Gerald Dawe, the Senior Lecturer in English and the Director of the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing at the famous Trinity College Dublin. Having inspired many of the literary greats and being home to the legendary Trinity College Library which holds some of the world's most rare and ancient texts, Trinity is a wealth of inspiration and Dawe furthers the great literary traditions through his work in English and his great strides in developing the creative writing landscape. He tells us about his significant moments as a writer, the importance of the work itself, and the timeless feel of a campus steeped in historical importance.

1) It has been said that poets and storytellers were held in high regard, just beneath kings in Celtic history. In your opinion, what role does the work of poets and authors play in the lush, mythical and literary landscape of modern day Ireland?

The authority that once accrued to poetry and fiction making in Ireland is still strong but not as embedded as it once was, say, forty or more years ago. Literature is very much part of the national culture still in Ireland, but probably more as entertainment than before. There are numerous festivals and readings taking place throughout the year in many, many venues and towns throughout the country. And many more

people are involved in writing too, with numerous writing courses, workshops and so on. The critical edge of imaginative and dramatic discussion and questioning of what is good and what is not so good has all but disappeared from the literary scene. Whether this is a good or bad thing, I haven't made my mind up about. The sentimental and often rosy tinted view of Ireland as home to a 'Celtic' dream world of the imagination is as much humbug today as it was in the 19th century.

2) F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "No one felt like this before- says the young writer- but I felt like this; I have a pride akin to a soldier going into battle; without knowing whether there will be anybody there to distribute medals or even record it..." What do you emphasize the most about the craft of creative writing to your students and how are those philosophies reflected in the Oscar Wilde Centre? Can you tell us a little bit about the Centre and its origins?

At the Wilde Centre we don't go in for philosophies but focus exclusively on work and getting each of the students, who come from all walks of life, different backgrounds, age profiles, to produce the BEST work that they can as a group of engaged students sharing for a year the house in which Wilde was born in the middle of Dublin, a vibrant modern European city. The Centre was established ten years ago and is the base for a select group of students of creative writing and Irish literature who, for the duration of one academic year, study for their Masters degree. It is an international group of scholars and writers in the School of English at Trinity who are taught by faculty and various other leading writers and visiting fellows.

3) How does having access to the world famous four hundred and sixteen year old Trinity College Library affect and inspire both your students and yourself? Do the ancient texts, such as the *Book of Kells*, foster an invigorating sensation to the creatively inclined or a humbling feeling of solemnity, standing before something sacred? Do the efforts of the scribes to preserve the written word in the form of the *Book of Kells* still carry the timeless message of the worth of writing even in a quick information,

technology age?

I think the only way of describing this is to see for yourself!

4) What, at least up until this point, has been your most significant moment as a writer?

Oh, that's traveling through what was known as East Europe in the late 80's just before the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and visiting numerous countries as they emerged from the Cold War - Poland, the Czech and Slovak republics...seeing is believing - and traveling into the heartland of Europe, seeing the landscape, and the sites of history which I had only heard about as a kid in Belfast back in the fifties and sixties.

5) Is there a story of a particular student or class that stands out in your mind that you would like to share? And if there was a list of essential books for a devout or aspiring writer to read, please name three that you would feel would be prudent choices.

Perseverance is the only way for a writer and all our students know that this is the only way to achieve what you set out to do as a poet or novelist or playwright. There is no easy way. As for three books - the range is simply vast, but I'd nominate three of my own favorites: W.B. Yeats Collected Poems, D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers and the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop.

Last thoughts... In acknowledgment of the autumn season and the impending holiday of Halloween, have there ever been any supernatural or ghostly occurrences/myths associated either with the library or older parts of the campus that you know of?

Not that I know of, but the College is an old and venerable place that has housed so many great students from Swift to Beckett, and that's not mentioning all the scientists, geographers, geneticists, philosophers, legislators, sociologists...you name it, who have padded the cobblestones during the past four

hundred years. I'm sure some of them call by now and then just to see how things are shaping up in the 21st century. On the misty wintry morning heading by the cricket and rugby pitches you can almost imagine it is another time than now.

Gerald Dawe's most recent collection, his seventh, *Points West*, has just been published by The Gallery Press.

*Here we would like to thank both 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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