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The Dovekeepers by Alice Hoffman

Discussion questions used at SPL -- January 2013

1. What did you know about the siege of Masada before you read this book? Did it expand your knowledge historically?
2. Did you like the way the story was told in 4 voices? Did the author do a good job in differentiating the women?
3. Which character did you identify most with? Why? Was there one (or more) that you didn't like? Why?
4. They all had harsh lives but whose was hardest in your opinion?
5. Do you think these women were exceptional for their time?
6. Why do you think women were treated the way they were in this culture? Do you think it was that different from others of the time?
7. Do you feel like women are still suppressed now? Why do you think that is? What can we do to prevent that?
8. Which male characters were most interesting to you? Which ones made you the most resentful of their actions?
9. What sort of relationships were there between parent and child . . . Yael and her father (the assassin) . . . Yael's brother Amram and the father . . . Aziza and Shirah . . . Revka and her daughter . . . Revka and the grandsons.
10. When did Yael feel as though she had value? Why do you think she was able to survive as she did?
11. How did the love stories go for you? Between Amram and Aziza . . . Shira and Eleazar . . . Nahara and Malachi of the Essenes? Yael and the Man from the North . . . Aziza and the Man from the Valley . . . Did love hurt them or help them . . . Or both?

12. What did you think of the use of magic in the book? Who really used it? Or was it just part of life and not so magical? The cloak that made you disappear . . . Or did it? The love potions . . . the healing potions . . . the dreams and visions?
13. How important were animals in this book . . . not just as sustenance but as symbols? The lion . . . the scorpion... what else can you think of?
14. What did you think of Channa, the woman who tried to kidnap Yael's baby? Did your opinion of her change over the book? What was she fighting for? Was she as strong as the four main characters?
15. How much of a role did religion play in this story? How important was the Jewish religion to the women? What did they believe in?
16. How was war portrayed in this book? Were any of them prepared for it? Why do you think Aziza had such a strong reaction to the slaughter of women and children by her fellow warriors? Why did the Jewish soldiers do that?
17. Women's knowledge was never written down... in fact when Shirah wrote her spells, she had to hide them . . . Why do you think that was? Do you think it might have been because women were mainly unskilled in reading and writing? And why do you think that was?
18. Did the author make it clear why the Romans were going after the Jews? Especially the ones at Masada?
19. Why do you think Yael and Revka and the children were allowed to live? Why didn't Shirah go with them? Why did Yael become Shirah – the Witch of Moab?
20. What did you think of the leaders' decision to kill themselves rather than surrendering to Rome? Was it braver than surrendering? Did it make the Roman victory less of a victory?
21. Did the author do a good job in describing the chaos within the fortress as the siege wound down?
22. Would you recommend this book to people?
23. Have you read other Alice Hoffman books? How would you compare this to her others? If not, did this make you want to read more of hers?
24. Much like *The Red Tent*, this is a way to tell women's stories that were ignored by history . . . How do you think Hoffman did in creating their world and their lives?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Discussion questions taken from LitLovers.com

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/8581-dovekeepers-hoffman>

1. The novel is split into four principal parts, with each of the main characters—Yael, Revka, Aziza, and Shirah—narrating one section. Which of these women did you find most appealing, and why? Were you surprised to find you had compassion for characters who were morally complex and often made choices that later caused guilt and sorrow?
2. Yael describes her relationship with Ben Simon as "a destroying sort of love" (p. 46). What does she mean by that? Are there other relationships in the novel that could be described in the same way?
3. From Yael's setting free the Romans' lion, to Shirah's childhood vision of a fish in the Nile, to the women's care of the doves, animals are an important component in the book. What did animals mean to the people of this ancient Jewish society, and what specific symbolic forms do they take in the novel?
4. The figure of Wynn, "The Man from the North," who comes to serve the women in the dovecote, is based upon archeological finds at Masada. In what ways does Wynn come to bring the women together? Compare Yael's relationship with Ben Simon to her relationship with Wynn.
5. How do spells function in the novel? What is the relationship between Shirah's Jewish beliefs and her use of magic? If you have read other Alice Hoffman novels that include mystical elements—such as *Practical Magic* or *Fortune's Daughter*—how do they compare to *The Dovekeepers* and its use of magic?
6. How do Shirah's daughters react to the intimate friendship that develops between Yael and their mother? Is Shirah a good mother or not?
7. What do you make of Channa's attempt, essentially, to kidnap Yael's baby Ariele? Is Channa different from the other major female characters in the book? Do you find your opinion of her changes?

8. "You don't fight for peace, sister," Nahara tells Aziza. "You embrace it." (p. 343) What do you think of Nahara's decision to join the Essenes? Is she naïve or a true believer? Do you see similarities between the Essenes and the early Christian movement?
9. Why is the Roman Legion preparing to attack the Jews at Masada? From historical references in the book, as well as your own knowledge of history, explain the roots of the conflict. Do you feel the lives of the women in *The Dovekeepers* echo the lives of women in the modern world who are experiencing war and political unrest?
10. Revka's son-in-law, the warrior known as The Man from the Valley, asks Aziza, "Did you not think this is what the world was like?" (p. 378). Describe the circumstances of this question. After all her training for battle, why is Aziza unprepared for the experience of attacking a village filled with women and children?
11. In the final pages of the book, Yael sums up those who perished at Masada, remembering them as "men who refused to surrender and women who were ruled by devotion" (p. 478). Do you agree with her description?
12. For the women at Masada, dreams contain important messages, ghosts meddle in the lives of the living, and spells can remedy a number of human ills. How does their culture's acceptance of the mystical compare to our culture's view on such things today? Do mystical and religious elements overlap? How do they compare to your own views?
13. In the letter below, Hoffman explains that the historical foundation of her story comes from Josephus, the first-century historian who has written the only account of the massacre. How does knowing that the novel is based on history and archeological findings affect your reading of the book?
14. Women's knowledge in *The Dovekeepers* is handed down from mother to daughter, sister to sister, friend to friend. Why do you think it is so difficult to know what the lives of ancient women were really like? Do you see any connection with the way in which your own family stories are handed down through the generations?
(Questions issued by publisher.)

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For information about Masada, go to Unesco.org

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1040>