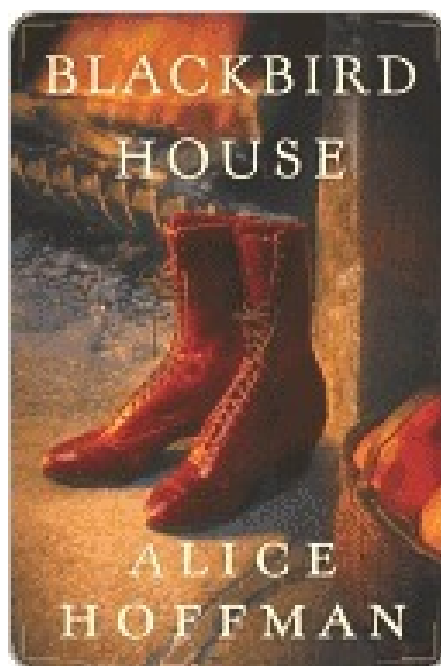




Blackbird House

Alice Hoffman

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With “incantatory prose” that “sweeps over the reader like a dream,” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), Hoffman follows her celebrated bestseller *The Probable Future*, with an evocative work that traces the lives of the various occupants of an old Massachusetts house over a span of two hundred years.

In a rare and gorgeous departure, beloved novelist Alice Hoffman weaves a web of tales, all set in Blackbird House. This small farm on the outer reaches of Cape Cod is a place that is as bewitching and alive as the characters we meet: Violet, a brilliant girl who is in love with books and with a man destined to betray her; Lysander Wynn, attacked by a halibut as big as a horse, certain that his life is ruined until a boarder wearing red boots arrives to change everything; Maya Cooper, who does not understand the true meaning of the love between her mother and father until it is nearly too late. From the time of the British occupation of Massachusetts to our own modern world, family after family’s lives are inexorably changed, not only by the people they love but by the lives they lead inside Blackbird House.

These interconnected narratives are as intelligent as they are haunting, as luminous as they are unusual. Inside Blackbird House more than a dozen men and women learn how love transforms us and how it is the one lasting element in our lives. The past both dissipates and remains contained inside the rooms of Blackbird House, where there are terrible secrets, inspired beauty, and, above all else, a spirit of coming home.

From the writer *Time* has said tells “truths powerful enough to break a reader’s heart” comes a glorious travelogue through time and fate, through loss and love and survival. Welcome to *Blackbird House*.

Blackbird House Details

Date : Published July 20th 2004 by Doubleday (first published January 1st 2004)

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Author : Alice Hoffman

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From Reader Review Blackbird House for online ebook

Gina says

This book was good, but it could've been so much better.... Basically it's a series of short stories, all taking place at the same little cottage in Cape Code, with a generation or so passing between each entry. The characters are mostly tragic, with an occasional happy ending thrown in to keep things from getting TOO depressing. Each story hinges on love, whether romantic or platonic, and the discovery, exploration, and often, loss of this love. Although the stories are predictable, the characters are endearing and the descriptions are evocative, particularly of the sea and surrounding forests and gardens. My one complaint, and it's a big one, is that every story ends abruptly, usually just before the climatic scene. For example, a character will finally realize that she loves someone... and then it ends, before she actually tells him. Or a long lost person will finally return... but it ends just as they're about to be reunited with their loved ones. Then in the next story, the main character will be the son or grandson of the previous characters, so you know that they did end up together. It just would've been nice to SEE that happy stuff, instead of inferring it afterward.

Shorty says

Blackbird House is simply wonderful. This book was absolutely beautifully drawn with such attention to detail of the human condition, its interconnectedness to others and most importantly, to a certain place.

Blackbird House is the most unique collection of short stories I've ever read. It's not just a story here and there comprised of different characters and settings with the only common denominator being that of the author, instead there's a common thread woven throughout: the House, its history and the type of inhabitants it attracts. And the writing...! Alice Hoffman is such an eloquent writer. Her prose is simple but evocative, mystical but magical, detailed but not flowery.

The stories are phenomenal, too. And some I will have to go back to re-read because I think I may have missed some of the trademark Alice Hoffman-isms of magical realism. I can hardly believe it is 200+ pages. I devoured it so quickly and was so sad it was over. The concept of connected stories of the folks that moved through the Blackbird House just works so well, and there are very few writers who can tell a story like Alice Hoffman. Being immersed in her books is like sitting by a campfire with a great storyteller and just being carried away. Needless to say, I have a lot of catching up to do on her books - and catch up I will. Alice Hoffman always reminds me of why I enjoy reading so much.

My only complaint of Blackbird House is that some stories tend to end a little abruptly, like without much resolution, making us wonder what really happened. In the end, I wanted things to come more full-circle, explicitly tying every story and every generation together, but it didn't, not really. Not for me.

4 happy stars. Read this novel soon!

Amanda says

The title for this book, according to Good Reads, indicates that this is a novel, and in a way it is. But it's

more of a series of short stories, all centered around a house haunted by a white blackbird, the pet of a young boy lost at sea with his father.

With each story, Hoffman paints a picture of a new generation living in the house. Each story is different and special in its own way. There's tragedy, love, hope...all things found in abundance in all of Hoffman's novels, threaded through several stories to make one coherent timeline of events.

I have to generally be in the mood for short story books. Sometimes my mind can't switch from one plot to another in such a short amount of time (though sometimes I need the switch when I'm feeling too ADD to read a full novel). This one was easy to follow. Each story links to the other, so even though the plot changes, there's still a continuity that gives it an easy literary flow. Full of great imagery and the prominent color of red coloring the description, this was a truly great book, well written, poignant, and perfect for a rainy day.

Paloma says

I think I've never read anything so completely perfect.

This book was so multifaceted, so enchanting, magical, binding, freeing, gut wrenching.

I've always meant to read Alice Hoffman I just never got around to it. But I did and now I understand. You know your going to read something that's going to change your life when the first sentence leaves you breathless. I mean seriously it was perfect, the syntax was perfect every sentence that she crafts could stand alone as a poem.

This particular book appealed to me because I love magical realism and also because, I live in New England and though I live here its elusive in a way, so out or reach to me. The traditions the history isolate me in the same way that they make me feel part of something. And reading this really helped to remind me of why I appreciate this little corner of the world.

This book is told in the span of a hundred years, they all involve this house that was built by a fishermen for his wife in the whaling days, all of the stories are magical and all feature love,loss and they all conclude in the characters turning point if you will.

Believe me when I say that it seems as if the characters live on from the twenty something pages each little story is enclosed in.

I'm not going to say I have a favorite because they were all equally riveting but I will include a quote that stood out more than the others for some reason. It's from the story "Black is the color of my true love's hair"

"I read books as though I was eating apples, core and all, starved for those pages, hungry for every word that told me about things I didn't yet have, but still wanted terribly, wanted until it hurt."

I just finished this book and once I closed the last page I held up the book to my cheek to see if I could feel it pulsing. It truly did seem to beat and pulse, with sweet pea scented blood.

Dani Peloquin says

I have to be honest, I read this book months ago but was unable at the time to find the words to describe this novel. I just have to start by saying that it is one of the best novels I have ever read in my life (and I clearly read a lot). Previous to reading *Blackbird House*, I had never picked up an Alice Hoffman novel. I knew that she had written *Practical Magic* and some other novels in the same vein and I thought that she wouldn't be my kind of author. However, when I cracked the spine on the *Blackbird House*, I wanted to slap my own wrist!

It is very difficult to adequately explain this novel because it is very simple and yet some of the stories are quite complex. Basically, the novel is made up of short stories (those of you out there who don't like short stories, don't run away yet!) about a house on Cape Cod that was built in the 1700s. There are twelve stories in the "novel" and each describes a new generation of the house as it is bought, sold, and passed down through certain generations. The stories follow the characters but only as it relates to the house. The true development of the book is that of the house and the times that surround each generation of owners. Each owner brings a part of themselves to the property which allows the house to grow with its inhabitants. There is no climax or enthralling events, the true satisfaction comes with the unveiling of each person and the mark they leave on the house.

I simply adored this book. I thought that it was beautiful in every way. The characters were not always likable but they were real, which I believe is far more important. The atmosphere was almost tangible and I felt completely engrossed with each tale. There isn't a single "story" that I could pin point as my favorite because they were all splendidly written. This is a book that I will certainly go back to over and over again and urge others to do the same.

www.iamliteraryaddicted.blogspot.com

Will Byrnes says

Places have much greater permanence than people. Land exists for eons (now don't get picky about ocean fronts migrating and the Big Island expanding. You know what I mean) whereas people last mere generations, and often much less. On the surface at least, *Blackbird House* is a novel of place, in which the Blackbird House of the title is the stage, and each short story offers characters who play across it. There should be a name (and probably is, but I just do not know it, novel-in-stories or linked-stories maybe) for so-called novels that are comprised of linked short-stories. Maybe, as this one is about a house, it could be a *building-roman*. This is a form Hoffman employs rarely. Her later book, *The Red Garden*, does exactly the same thing, watching the lives that intersect a place over time. But she usually writes novels in a more traditional format.

Hoffman is very easy to read. Her characters are interesting and engaging, and I almost always want her people to persist beyond the pages of their particular tale. Sometimes they cross from one story to the next, and it is always a wonderful thing. The Blackbird House of the title was built in 18th century Cape Cod, at a time when the British were enforcing a blockade. Many of the locals were seafaring folk, fishermen mostly. John Hadley, a fisherman, and builder of the Blackbird House, who had planned to live a safer existence as a farmer, is at sea with his two sons, hoping for one last, end-of-season haul, when a sudden storm erupts, leaving only one survivor. Well, one human survivor. Young Isaac had taken along a blackbird that he had raised from a chick, and that blackbird makes it back home. This being Alice Hoffman, the bird not only made it back, but had turned white, supposedly from having touched sea foam. And so it begins.

Odd events take place in Hoffman's magical universe. Pilot whales beach en masse, the voices of those not

quite passed seem to be singing; a shipwreck survivor's hands are marked by the copper bands of a barrel that had saved him, rumors of a serpent arise; the white blackbird puts in an appearance in every story, a stand-in for, or reminder of the title house, or maybe a reminder of an existential crisis for one of the characters, maybe just the spirit of the place; the color red seems to seep from the earth itself, a giant fish saves a shipwreck survivor, then takes payment by biting off one of the man's legs. The man spits up fish teeth for the rest of his days. In other words, a typical Alice Hoffman magical, almost fairy-tale book. What fun!

The stories traverse two hundred years, and touch on some of the darker sides of our history. A poor woman, seemingly targeted by God or nature for particularly harsh treatment, manages to survive, somewhat addled, and the townies see her as a witch, with the accompanying shunning. This is New England after all.

As a summer resident of the Cape for 25 years by the time *Blackbird House* was published, Hoffman had a pretty good familiarity with the environment that informs her stories. This supported her tendency to ground this work with aspects of the land itself. In a relatively serene landscape, in which most local soil is not good for much, the land on which the *Blackbird House* sits stands out. Early on the property is planted with a pear tree that produces red fruit. Sweet peas and sweet turnips, planted in an early story feed characters in subsequent tales. Several characters manifest unusual, extreme connections to nature. One resident adds a bit of cannabis to the local flora, but that remains mostly out of sight in following tales. Several characters seem to have a rapport with the land that would make Tom Bombadil proud.

Loss is a permanent resident. From the widow of the opening piece to Ruth, in *The Witch of Truro*, who loses her parents to smallpox and her home to fire, and in a later story her husband; love is sought, sometimes found, often lost. This collection of stories has enough instances of loss and subsequent salvation that it could easily have been titled *Lost and Found on the Cape*.

These are mostly tales of strong women. A few male characters get their moments in the spotlight, but it is primarily a female's stage. Having to overcome misfortune, having to struggle against nature, ignorance, fear, lost hope, these women struggle to survive, whether that means doing in an abusive spouse, shearing off locks to aid in disguising as a man and joining the army, taking up residence with a one-legged blacksmith just to have a roof over her head, battling cancer, enduring years of abuse, suffering with loneliness, struggling to gain the affection of a man. Hope does battle with despair.

Hoffman offers a bit of mirroring in her front and back. The opening story has a 10-year old drowning at sea, and another young lad comes to a dark end in the final pages. This may have a root in Hoffman's personal experience. Hoffman bought an old Cape Cod house that was supposedly haunted by the ghost of a 10 year old who had drowned. During the writing of some of these stories, Hoffman was enduring chemo for cancer. In fact while she was being treated she met a neighbor, a girl, who was also being treated. That she incorporated into her story such earth-bound symbols of regeneration, the pear tree, the turnips, seems like no accident in light of that. Nor do the repeated struggles with misfortune that her characters endure.

Alice Hoffman has written many wonderful novels. Whether one considers this a true novel or some other form of literature, *The Blackbird House* is an engaging, fascinating and satisfying read, combining the grounding of earth with flight of fantasy, in short, the work of a master of her craft.

K M says

This lovely book contains short stories about the various inhabitants of a farmhouse in Cape Cod over a 200

year period. The stories are refreshingly unique, yet bound together by several common threads: the farmhouse itself, the land and all that has been planted on it over time, a strange white blackbird, recurring characters and/or their progeny, and the color red. All of these things make the reader feel familiar with the land and property in an intimate way - as if the reader is connected with the house. In my opinion, a very satisfying read.

Jeanette says

Very shortly after starting this book I did recall that I had read it before. More than a decade ago although the title didn't stick. But I wasn't sure if I had read the entire thing or just some of the stories between jobs at the time. So I continued and I did remember most of them. Her prose language and flow of visuals for that land and property made the reading pleasant and gave the locale nuance depth. That I enjoyed to a 4 star level.

But the stories themselves in particular the characters, especially the witch related and the most dire in outcomes- seem so "distant" as real people in the telling! I notice this in many other pieces of fiction that are designated magic realism or fantasy genre. And although I cannot describe it as typical to the form or give its baseline characteristics to why it seems so removed and "above the fray" impersonal- it comes off that way to me. And most of the time I do not feel at all compelled to embed in the tales or have continued tension toward learning their outcomes

Alice Hoffman can write and I love some of hers far, far more than I do others. The ones I have liked the best hold more "eyes" of the main protagonist looking out to their perceptions of the world and situation and hold far less of this universal overlook. And don't hold much with the witch angles either.

She still produces flow and phrases of beauty on her worst writing day!

Connie says

The gorgeous cover drew me to Blackbird House, and this book of twelve interwoven short stories did not disappoint me. The stories are set on a small farm in a fishing village on Cape Cod from the 18th Century to the present time. Residents of the Blackbird House have experienced many challenges in life, and deep love that makes it all worthwhile.

Like many of Alice Hoffman's works, this book has elements of magical realism. There have been sightings of the ghost of a young boy lost at sea, and his pet blackbird whose feathers turned white after the violent storm. All of the emotions that make us human were on display in these impressive stories--love, loss, fear, hope, and contentment.

PorshaJo says

Rating 3.5

I was looking for a short audio while waiting on another book. I saw this one on Hoopla and knew I had to listen to it. I'm a fan of Alice Hoffman and always enjoy getting to another book of hers. When I first started, it said there are 11 narrators. WHAT??? But there are 11 stories, each one narrated by a different person. It

was done very well.

This is a series of 11 stories that are interlinked in some way. Each story is unique. Sometimes a story ends rather quickly and you find out what happens through the next story. I know many people of not fans of this type of story, but I just love it. Some of the stories really stood out, such as 'The Conjurers Handbook' about a young man falling in love with a Jewish woman who survived the Holocaust. Each story has some common theme - a house, a blackbird, or whitebird, the color red, love, family, and more. This book is quite similar to her book The Red Garden, a series of interlinked stories, but this one was about a town. Side note, I did review this one but it's magically disappeared. (What's up with GR lately????)

Anyway, another fun read from Hoffman and a quick audio that kept me interested in hearing more. What I love about Hoffman's books is that they are all so different, and comforting.

Annalisa says

A charming collection of stories detailing the residents of a farmhouse in Cape Cod spanning two hundred years. It took me several stories to realize that the book followed the house not the people, but once I understood that, I stopped trying to connect their stories and enjoyed the vivid setting. I could see and smell that New England charm as Hoffman breathed life to generations of American culture.

Rachel says

I have been thinking a lot about this book and why I felt the way I did about it. I write short stories so this book should have resonated with me. I enjoyed the first of the short stories. Honestly, it was the best one and I wish she had continued on with it or at least with the descendants of the original family. I felt invested in their lives. When she got to the story of the witch girl in the red shoes, she lost me. She tried too hard with all the red, and while I love beautiful language I felt as if she was whipping me across the face with all her different allusions to red and blood. In the more modern stories I stopped caring. I tried and I so wanted to love this. I think if it had even been the story of one family through the generations, it would have moved me more than it did. There were just too many loose ends.

Book of Secrets says

BLACKBIRD HOUSE is another memorable book from Alice Hoffman, one that would appeal to a lover of American historical fiction and magical realism, like me. The book is a collection of 12 interconnected short stories set on the same remote farm on Cape Cod. The imaginative stories span 200 years, beginning at the British blockade of the cape during the War of 1812 through present day, and their common denominator is Blackbird House.

The first story, "The Edge of the World," sets the mysterious atmosphere of the book, when an eerie bird takes up residence at the farm. The bird makes an appearance throughout the next two centuries, as the house's occupants experience love, loneliness, and loss, heartbreak and hope.

I enjoyed all of the stories, but there were a few that really stood out: "The Conjurer's Handbook," about a WWII soldier who falls in love with a Jewish guide at a prison camp; "Black is the Color of My True Love's

Hair,” about love at first sight and sibling rivalry; and “Insulting the Angels,” about a man willing to change the world for a complete stranger.

I love Alice Hoffman's lyrical writing style, and her tragic and triumphant characters. I just need to read a few lines of the first page, and I'm hooked. I would also recommend Ms. Hoffman's THE RED GARDEN, which is another collection of short stories, only they're connected by a town instead of one house. Fantastic reading!

Source: I borrowed this book from the library.

Mark says

Once again the curse of GR website swallowed a review. So screamingly annoying that the laptop almost was thrown across the room. However I am determined that Alice Hoffman will receive the praise she is due for this lovely book so I shall do the whole bloody thing again. Goodreads, I truly hate you sometimes!!

This collection, to use a somewhat contrived metaphor, is like a number of small coloured stones or polished glass strung together to create a simple but very effective thing of beauty. By themselves none of the stories blew me away but linked by their common theme they were astounding. The common theme is love but in its myriad of forms and across some 200 years of local history not following a single bloodline family but rather by exploring the lives, loves and, it has to be said, frequent deaths of the inhabitants of a narrow spit of land.

Hoffman uses the healthy, energising, transforming love found in all areas of life but she also explores the way love can become misshapen and grindingly destructive. She reflects on the ability of lovers to overcome and survive and she recognizes the way love can embitter and stunt. Love, she says, is necessary for life but of itself it is not magic, it still needs moulding and controlling. Love is freeing and can be transformative of the life of the one who is loved but that transformation has to be the by-product not the intention.

These stories are linked overtly by their geography and by the over-riding theme of love but they are also less obviously linked by the run of characters. The stories are self-contained reflections but they are often left open-ended where the resolution first can grow in the imagination of the reader but then is revisited in the next story, sometimes through obvious associations but sometimes by a chance detail left camouflaged by the side of the path of the next story as it takes the reader deeper on into the history of the land. You could also miss it but after a few pages of Hoffman's style you swiftly become accustomed, to quote the flyleaf, "her heartbreaking clarity". With a few of the stories the denouement pierces the reader as it spears down like a damoclean sword which you knew was hanging precariously .

You knew of this threat because it needs to be faced that Hoffman rejoices, if that is the right word, in the bleak sorrow of the death not so much of love as the lover. All her stories bring us into the atmosphere of the vulnerability and fragility of life. Indeed every time I opened one of the stories i began looking for the likely corpse at the end. It reminded me rather of the game my brothers and I used to enter into in the 1970's whilst watching Star Trek. 'Spot-the-bit-actor-who-had-no-chance-of-returning-to-the-Starship-Enterprise-with-a-pulse'. Admittedly that was never very difficult, it was the bloke you had never seen before whereas in Hoffman's creations you wait rather nervously for the inevitable if unknown victim.

So, her stories are sad, they are poignant reminders of the need to work at love, to never take it for granted but also to make sure you rejoice in it when it comes. And it is that power to enlarge and enhance life which I take from this collection. None of the stories are histrionic, none of them are miserable for the sake of misery, she is not so much a Prophet or Oracle of doom as she is a pointer to live the opportunities offered.

This is the first of her work I have read, I cannot imagine and I most certainly hope it will not be the last. I closed the book with the last simple image in my head and it made me smile. The final impression with which you leave this small world of hers is one of hope and possibility. Lovely.

Jessika says

This being my first read by Alice Hoffman, I must say--I think I've found a new author to add to my favorites list. I'm absolutely itching to go out and read everything else she's written.

What I loved the most about Alice Hoffman's writing was her style. It was absolutely phenomenal. Between her use of words and her descriptions, I was *there*. This is definitely one of those books that you just want to soak up and enjoy the words. However, for being a book that at times reads almost like poetry, this was a quick read. I stretched it out over a few days just to make it last!

I was pleasantly surprised by this book in particular because the story of the various occupants of Blackbird House is told through interconnected short stories. I'm not usually into that format. Let's face it--not many authors can pull that off well, without telling a completely disjointed tale. I loved all of the stories, and I felt a connection to each character and their situations. I won't lie, I didn't want the individual stories to end. I wanted to find out what happened to each of the characters. But she flows right between stories without confusion of any sort. Like I said, my only complaint was that I wanted *MORE*!

Overall, I was very impressed with Hoffman, and I'm looking forward to reading more by her. This would be the perfect book to curl up with on a rainy day!
