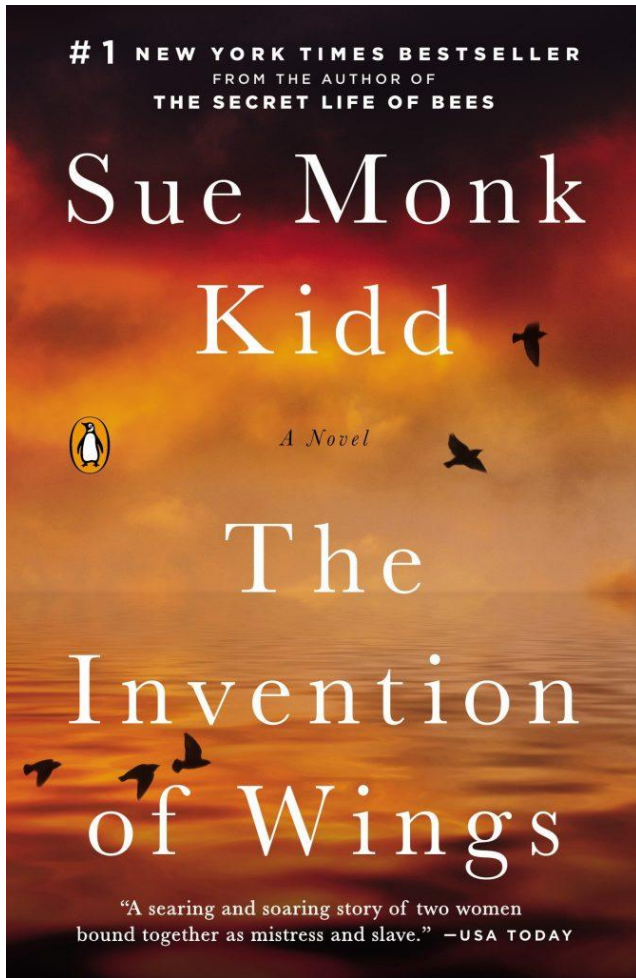


# The Invention of Wings – Reading Groups



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## Introduction to *The Invention of Wings*

*The Invention of Wings*, a powerful and sweeping historical novel by Sue Monk Kidd, begins, fittingly, with an image of flight: Hetty “Handful”, who has grown up as a slave in early nineteenth century Charleston, recalls the night her mother told her that her ancestors in Africa could fly over trees and clouds. That day, Handful’s mother, Charlotte, gave her daughter the gift of hope— the possibility that someday she might regain her wings and fly to freedom. Throughout Kidd’s exquisitely written story, Handful struggles, sometimes with quiet dissidence, sometimes with open rebellion, to cultivate a belief in the invincibility of her spirit and in the sacred truth that one does not need actual wings in order to rise.

Barely a stone's throw from the slave quarters where Handful and her mother share a room behind the grand Grimké house, another young woman fights a different battle with the constraints of her society. Sarah Grimké is the middle daughter of a wealthy and prominent family at the pinnacle of Charleston's social hierarchy—the daughter her mother calls difficult and her father calls remarkable. From the time of her first violent childhood confrontation with slavery, Sarah is unable to abide the oppression and brutality of the slave system that surrounds her. Ambitious and keenly intelligent, she harbors an intense longing to have a voice in the world and to follow her father and brothers' footsteps to a profession in the law. Crushed by the strictures that her family and society impose on women, Sarah forges a tortuous, yet brave path toward abolition and women's rights—a crusade in which she will be joined by her fiery sister Angelina.

The story begins on Sarah's eleventh birthday, when ten-year-old Handful is abruptly pulled from the Grimké's work yard, adorned in lavender ribbons, and presented to Sarah as a gift. Sarah tries in vain to decline, but over time, the two create a bond that will ultimately and dramatically shape their destinies.

As their intertwined stories unfold in their own voices, Sarah will eventually break from the only life she knows and go north to become an exile, encountering love and heartbreak, repression and renaissance as she searches for her voice and her place of belonging. Back home, Handful will experience her mother's mysterious disappearance, finding strength and answers in the story quilt she leaves behind. When Denmark Vesey, a free black man with messianic charisma, plots a dangerous slave insurrection in the heart of Charleston, Handful becomes embroiled in a conspiracy that threatens to shake the city to its foundations.

Inspired by actual historical figures like Sarah and Angelina Grimké and Denmark Vesey, and enlivened by original creations like Charlotte and Handful, ***The Invention of Wings*** is the extraordinary story of two struggles for freedom: the battle of Handful to find the wings her mother promised and the equally intense quest of Sarah to liberate her mind and spirit. This triumphant novel also speaks with wisdom about the nature of evil and injustice, the courage to dare what seems unattainable, and the hope inside of us that the worst darkness can't extinguish.

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## About Sue Monk Kidd

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), became a genuine literary phenomenon, selling over six million copies in the U.S. and remaining on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than two years. Named Book Sense Book of the Year in 2004, it was adapted into an award-winning movie. Kidd's second novel, *The Mermaid Chair* (2005), sold over a million copies and garnered the Quill Award for General Fiction. She has co-written a bestselling memoir with her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor, titled *Traveling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story* (2009), as well as authoring several acclaimed memoirs, including *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996). Kidd lives in NC with her husband, Sandy.

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## A Conversation with Sue Monk Kidd

1. You had never heard of the Grimké sisters before you received the inspiration for *The Invention of Wings*. How did you first hear about them, and what was it about their story that captivated you?

I first came upon the Grimké sisters in 2007 while visiting Judy Chicago's Dinner Party exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Their names were listed on the Heritage Panels, which honor 999 women who've made important contributions to western history. Later, I was astonished to discover they were from Charleston, South Carolina, the same city in which I was then living. Somehow I'd never heard of these two amazing women, but I immediately dove in, learning everything I could, and the more I learned, the more excited I became. I discovered that Sarah and Angelina were from a wealthy slave-holding family, at the top of the planter class, moving in the elite circles of society, and yet they broke with everything, their family, religion, homeland and traditions, and became the first female abolition agents in America and among the earliest feminist thinkers. They were, arguably, the most radical females to ever come out of the antebellum South. I fell in love with their story. I was especially drawn to Sarah. I was moved by how thoroughly life was arranged against her and what she overcame, by how deeply she yearned to have a voice in the world, by how utterly human she was, and how determinedly she invented her wings.

I came of age in pre-feminist America. In 1963, the same year Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and reignited the women's revolution, I sat in a home economics class in high school, hemming skirts and learning how to make a home into a man's castle. I still recall the list of occupations for women I copied off the blackboard: teacher, nurse, secretary, sales clerk, homemaker... As I recall, there were less than twenty of them. I remember this moment quite well because I harbored a deep and formidable desire to be a writer, and it was nowhere on the roster. When I headed to college, I studied nursing, a noble profession, but it wasn't my place of belonging. I hadn't yet figured out how to think and act outside the confines of the world that shaped me. It took eight years after graduating from college for me to break out and pursue writing. Today, that reminds me a little of Sarah, who also had failures of courage and who was sometimes slow to take her leap. Oddly enough, it wasn't Friedan's book that shook me. It was Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*. Edna Pontellier's agonizing struggle against the limits her culture placed on women nearly leveled me. The lives of Sarah and Angelina Grimke affected me in a similar way. I know the world is radically different now, but I'm a believer that girls and women, and all of us, really, need all the stories of courage and daring we can get.

2. *The Invention of Wings* is voiced by two verbally powerful narrators: Sarah Grimké, who is inspired by the real-life abolitionist and feminist of the same name, and Hetty Handful, who is the child of your imagination. How does creating a character from the ground up differ from adapting a real person into a fictional persona, and which do you find more challenging?

One of the more unexpected things I experienced in writing the novel was that Handful's character and voice came to me with more ease than Sarah's. Handful would talk, talk, talk. Often I couldn't keep up with her. When I first began writing in her voice, the only parameters I gave myself were that I didn't want her voice to be weighed down with dialect and it must have traces of humor. I'd read a great many first person slave narratives from the nineteenth century, as well as the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s, and I had the voices of African-American women from my own childhood still resonating in me, along with the those of the quilting women of Gee's Bend, but I think what made Handful so accessible to me was her free, unrestricted reign in my imagination. She did not come with the fetters of a previous history. She could speak and do as she wished.

Sarah, on the other hand, came with a big historical script, and that turned out to be one of my biggest challenges. I revered Sarah's history to the point I initially became boxed-in by it. In the beginning, I had a hard time letting her venture outside factual borders. The longer she was cooped up by the facts, the quieter she got. I'd read the Grimke sisters' diaries and essays, and while they gave me an extraordinary glimpse into their lives, their writing was rendered in nineteenth century language, wrapped

in rhetoric, piety and stilted phrases. I wanted Sarah's voice in my novel to feel authentic and carry some of the vernacular of the time, but I knew I had to bring some modern sensibility to it. I rewrote her first chapters over and over, before I felt like I'd found her voice. Finding it was all about loosening it. I realized I had to tap into Sarah's inner life and set her free to speak from that timeless place, as well as from the time in which she lived. I needed to let her veer off script. I had to find Sarah in my imagination, as well as in history. Doing so brought her alive for me.

3. What was the process of writing the novel like for you? How did you go about your research? You've commented that you went further out on the writing limb with this novel than you've been before. What did you mean?

It took four years to write *The Invention of Wings*— three and a half years of writing, following six months of research. I'm not the fastest writer on the block. I spent a lot of protracted time sitting at the computer screen just contemplating the story, letting my imagination browse, trying to connect little dots, allowing ideas and revelations to come to me. Plus, I was constantly stopping to look up something in a book—what sort of mourning dress did women wear in 1819? What book titles would be on a library shelf in 1804? What were the emancipation laws in South Carolina? When I wasn't ruminating or scouring books, I was writing, and then rewriting as I went, rarely moving to the next chapter until I felt I'd rendered the last one as close as possible to the final draft. I would easily spend an entire day tinkering with the prose on a single page.

The way into the early nineteenth century, of course, is through an awful lot of research. My husband joked I spent more time in the nineteenth century than I did in the twenty-first. My aim was to create a "world" for the reader to enter, one as richly textured, tangible, and authentic as I could make it. I read and read, filling up five big notebooks with details and ideas. I drew maps of the interior of the Grimké house and the work yard, and etched a loose outline of the thirty-five year span of the story on large sheets of paper, one for each of the book's six parts. I hung them in my study, using them to map the flow of events. I also made lots of field trips, visiting libraries, museums, historical societies, and historic houses, all of which I may have enjoyed a little too much because I finally had to make myself stop reading, mapping and traipsing about and start writing.

It's hard to articulate why it seemed this book took me further out on a limb. Maybe because the story had to accommodate such a sweeping amount of time. Maybe because it had two different narrators whose stories needed to be a match for one another, whose voices had to be distinct, and whose journeys had to be synchronized. I was challenged, as I've already mentioned, by writing from the complicated intersection of imagination and history, and quite honestly, it was unnerving to take on something as big as slavery. Most daunting, though, was the

notion of writing from the mind, heart and persona of an enslaved person. I wanted to create Handful in a way that was convincing and respectful. It may have been safer to write her character from a third person perspective, and I did actually start off that way, but I hadn't written two pages before her first person voice broke in, and that was that. I'm forever plastering quotes and evocations about my study. One that I kept on my desk as I wrote this novel simply said: Be fearless on the page. I often paused to read it. It caused me to at least try.

4. For us, one of the pivotal moments in the story comes when Handful reads the ledger on which she and her mother are listed and appraised as part of the Grimké family's property. What does that moment in the novel mean to you?

During my research, I came upon a thesis about the Grimké's Charleston house that included a transcript of a legally executed inventory and appraisal of all the "goods and chattels" in the house at the time of Sarah's father's death in 1819. As I read through this long and detailed list, I was shocked to come upon the names of seventeen slaves. They were inserted between a Brussels staircase carpet and eleven yards of cotton and flax. I read their names, their ages, the roles they performed—coachman, cook, waiting maid, washer, house servant, seamstress, etc.—and I read what they were supposedly worth. One slave, Diana, thirty-six, was listed as "useless" and valued at \$1. There were four children included, ages eight, six, four, and three months. The eight year old was named Ben, the same as my grandson. Their mother was Bess, age thirty. Together the five of them had been valued at \$1500.

The moment hit me close to the bone, in part because of how real and close these human beings suddenly seemed, but also because of the sheer banality and acceptability of listing them as possessions among the carpets and cloth. Here was not just our human capacity for cruelty, but our ability to render it invisible. How do such things happen? How do we grow comfortable with the particulars of evil? How are we able to normalize it? How does evil gather when no one is looking? Discovering the seventeen names on the ledger was when I understood how dangerous it is to separate ourselves from our history, even when it's unspeakably painful.

Of course, the inventory found its way into the novel with Handful unearthing it in the library and finding her and her mother's names and appraised values. I suppose, for me, the scene represents the inevitable confrontation with the trauma of slavery, one that's all the more necessary because we have two hundred and forty-six years of slavery embedded in our history, and we can still hardly bear to look at it.

5. *The Invention of Wings* is about several simultaneous struggles for freedom. How did you develop the movements toward freedom in Handful's and Sarah's characters?

Handful and Sarah are both imprisoned in their own particular way. As a white woman in South Carolina in the early 1800s, even a privileged one, Sarah's life was vastly limited. Women had few rights, not to property or even to their own children. Essentially, they were the property of their husbands, and their purpose in life was to marry, have children, and live their lives within the domestic sphere. And yet, their lack of freedom could not compare to the horrific subjugation of enslaved women, whose entire lives were determined by their owners and whose suffering was infinitely worse. I felt like the primary thing I had to do was never lose sight of that.

As for how I developed Handful and Sarah's individual quests for freedom, I'm reminded of a certain looming moment in the story when Handful says to Sarah, "My body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it's the other way round." Handful is conveying a truth she knows only too well herself, that one's mind can become a cage, too. Finding their freedom had to do with liberating themselves internally, discovering a sense of self, and the boldness to express that self. There's a scene in which Handful willfully takes a bath in the Grimké's majestic copper bathtub. I can't tell you how much pleasure I derived from writing this scene. Handful's bath is tinged with defiance, but it becomes a baptism into her own worth. Observing her in the aftermath of it, Sarah says, "She had the look of someone who'd declared herself." Handful has begun to understand that even though her body is trapped in slavery, her mind is her own. The question then became how to emancipate herself physically. What needed to transpire inside of her to bring her to the crucial moment of risking everything? I felt that the moment occurs near the end of the story, when little missus disparages the story portrayed in her Charlotte's quilt and Handful fears she may burn it. I saw this moment as a kind of watershed in which all the accumulated sorrows and deprivations of Handful's life, and even of her mother's life, come together, causing her to want freedom more than the next breath. "To leave or die trying."

Sarah was steeped in family and cultural expectations for women, which crashed over and over against her ravenous intellect and hunger for an education, her passion for a vocation, her indomitable moral compass, and her courage—qualities that came to be reflected in her silver fleur de lis button, an object she would lose and re-find, figuratively, many times. The development of Sarah's freedom necessitated a whole series of "copper tub moments," each one bringing her a little closer to breaking fully free. My favorite such moment may be when she's caring for her dying father at the Jersey shore, and she wades into the ocean. Turning loose of the sea-rope, to which all the women grasp, she strides off on her own into the waves. Floating alone in the water, far from the tether, became her own baptism into

her apartness and independence. It was a small beginning. Later, she would have another moment when the inner voice showed up, telling her to go north. They go on and on, but the final piece of her liberation doesn't come, perhaps, until the end, when she's able to speak her mind in the house where she was born.

6. Sarah shared a close friendship with Lucretia Mott. What motivated you to include this relationship in the story?

It was a surprise for me when Lucretia Mott turned up as a character. I knew from my research that Mott, a famous abolitionist and women's rights pioneer herself, had attended the same meetinghouse in Philadelphia as Sarah, at least for a time, but I didn't know she would step into the pages of my story until the very moment she did so. It was a relief to me when she turned up. At this juncture, Sarah is alone in the North, and the only female presence in her life is Israel's sister, who is hardly a friend to her. Inevitably, a community of women will show up in my fiction, even if it's a community of two.

Many years ago, when I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, I was captivated by the idea of a woman having an independent space that belongs to her, that's devoted to her creative life and her intellectual and spiritual liberation. I rather loved creating such a room in Lucretia's house, a place where she and Sarah could spend time together. It is cozy, full of books, journals, art palettes, and velvet squares pinned with luna moths, which Lucretia finds lifeless in the garden, and it looks out over a copse of trees. Sarah calls it a studio, but it's inspired by Woolf's "room of one's own." So much of Sarah's life is about exile and seeking her place of belonging in the world, and it seemed that the studio would offer her a taste of what belonging to one's self could be like. The studio wasn't on the pages of the novel for very long, but the time the two women spent there was distilled and transforming for Sarah.

It was in the studio that Sarah poured out her story to Lucretia and had it truly received. At one point, Sarah asks Lucretia, "Do you think I could become a Quaker minister?" and Lucretia responds, "Sarah Grimké, you're the most intelligent person I know. Of course you could." Sarah had never really known this kind of listening, validation and encouragement. The scene brought to my mind theologian Nelle Morton's words, that women "hear one another into speech," and I thought, too, of theologian, Mary Daly, who said, "Only women hearing each other can create a counterworld to the prevailing reality."

There's a line in the novel that I truly loved writing, which actually thrilled me to write—it was four words that I had Lucretia send in a letter to Sarah and Angelina during their public crusade and which arrived at the height of backlash against them. It said, simply: "Press on, my sisters." Honestly, I think it was I who wanted to say those words to Sarah and Angelina, every bit as much as Lucretia did.



7. One of the more unique and striking aspects of the novel is Charlotte's story quilt. What drew you to include it in the story? What meaning did you want it to carry?

I was inspired by the quilts of Harriet Powers, who was born into slavery in 1837 in Georgia. She used West African applique technique and designs to tell stories, mostly about Biblical events, legends, and astronomical occurrences. Each of the squares on her two surviving quilts is a masterpiece of art and narration. After viewing her quilt in the archives of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., it seemed more than plausible to me that many enslaved women, who were forbidden to read and write, would have devised subversive ways to voice themselves, to keep their memories alive, and to preserve their African heritage. In the novel, Charlotte is the Grimke's rebellious and accomplished seamstress, and I envisioned her using needle and cloth the way others use paper and pen, attempting to set down the events of her life in a single quilt. She appliques it with strange, beautiful images—slaves flying through the air, spirit trees with their trunks wrapped in red thread—but she also sews violent and painful images of her punishments and loss. The quilt in the novel is meant to be more than a warm blanket or a nice piece of handiwork. It is Charlotte's story. As Handful says, "Mauma had sewed where she came from, who she was, what she loved, the things she'd suffered and the things she hoped. She'd found a way to tell it."

Above all, I wanted Charlotte's story quilt to speak about the deep need we have to make meaning out of what befalls us. I wanted it to suggest how important it is to take the broken, painful, and discarded fragments of our lives and piece them into something whole. There can be healing, and power, too, in giving expression to what's inside of us, in having our voices heard and our pain witnessed. As writer Isak Dinesen put it, "All sorrows can be borne if we put them in a story or tell a story about them."

8. How did you go about writing the complicated relationship between Handful and Sarah? It's hard to come up with a relationship between characters more challenging to write about than that of an owner and a slave. Even if the owner is an unwilling one, even if she has an abolitionist's heart beating in her chest, as Sarah does, it's still a problematic situation. It was the thing that kept me up at nights—Handful and Sarah's fraught connection and whether I was getting it right. In the novel, their relationship spans three and half decades, much of which they spend as constant companions. To a large extent, they mold one another's lives and shape each other's destinies. There's an undeniable caring between them, but also the built-in gulf of slavery. Handful tries to capture it when she says, "People say love gets fouled by a difference big as ours. I didn't know for sure whether Miss Sarah's feelings came from love or guilt. I didn't know whether mine came from love or a need to be safe. She loved me and pitied me. And I loved her and used her. It never was a simple thing."

Their relationship is disfigured by so many things: guilt, shame, pity, resentment, defiance, estrangement. I tried to create a relationship between them that allows for all of that, yet also has room for surprise, redemption, and even love. Someone who read an early copy of the novel commented that the two women create a sisterhood against all odds. I think they do—an uneasy, but saving sisterhood.

9. Sarah Grimké was both attracted by and repelled by organized religion. What role does it play in Sarah's life? How, if at all, does religion influence Handful? How would you describe Handful's spirituality?

The real-life Sarah Grimké was more pious than my version of her in the novel. During her Presbyterian and Quaker years, her devoutness seemed, at times, to border on asceticism. There's speculation among her biographers that her self-denial may have influenced her refusal to marry as much as her desire for independence. Both Sarahs, though, the one in history and the one in my story, carry on an intricate relationship with church and faith that was as conflicted as it was compatible. In the novel, it begins as twelve-year-old Sarah sits in church listening to the minister defend slavery. I felt it was important to acknowledge that slavery was supported not just by the government, but largely by the Church. The scene in St. Philip's precipitates Sarah's first crisis of faith. Did I make up my God, she asks, or did the reverend make up his? Later, in the wake of her heartbreak from her first love, Burke Williams, she leaves the Anglicans for the Presbyterians. She was genuinely in pursuit of God, but I muddied the water a bit, suggesting she was also in pursuit of a way out of the miseries she experienced in Charleston society.

From the time Sarah is four and witnesses a slave whipping—the “unspeakable” thing that mutes her voice—she moves between voice and voiceless-ness, her words often stuck in her throat. It struck me as fascinating and more than coincidental that she gives herself to the Quakers, a religion centered on the inner voice. As a Quaker, she's compelled to listen for a voice inside, a true one, and find a way to articulate it on her tongue. This, of course, is the large and ongoing struggle of her own life. Her audacious move to the Quakers gave her a way out of the South, just as the Presbyterians had given her a way out of society, and their doctrines supported and emboldened her antislavery beliefs and opened up the possibility of a vocation as a minister. She would pin all her hopes on the latter. She lands, however, in a branch of Quakerism that takes a highly conservative approach, and she often finds herself at odds with it. Her conflict with organized religion is nowhere more pronounced than in the scripture verse: “I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence,” a verse that was hauled out and used against her by New England ministers during her public crusade. After her expulsion from the Quakers, organized religion held less sway over her, and she came to rely more on her own spiritual core.

As a child, Handful compared God to master Grimké and wondered if there was a black God, too. Like many slaves in Charleston, she participated in house devotions, which helped to Christianize the slaves, but it was also a means of controlling them. Accentuating Bible verses on obedience, submission, and long-suffering was common. On this score, though, Handful learned how to give almost as good as she got. She learned the “Jesus-act” from her mother, which she used to her advantage. It got her permission to attend the African church, where she hoped to obtain information about her mother, but surprisingly enough to her, she found herself drawn into the church’s message of hope and deliverance. She found strength in the solidarity of the congregation. But I think, at heart, Handful was an animist, finding her connection with the divine through natural objects like the water she watched with such devotion from the alcove, making up songs to it. Her belief that God animated nature seems present, too, in her devotion to the spirit tree. In some ways, the tree, which she tended with red thread and wore pieces of about her neck, was her real “church.” It was a sort of sanctuary, a place of ritual, a place that held her spirit, her pain and her hope. The water and the tree, and perhaps even the birds in the branches, seemed to mediate God to her. They became Handful’s primary scripture.

10. Your writing tends to do more for your readers than simply entertain them. Reading one of your novels can be a kind of transformation. How do you hope that *The Invention of Wings* might affect someone who reads it?

It would certainly please me if readers finished the novel having learned something new about slavery, about the history of the early nineteenth century and the innovations of thought that helped to create the abolition and women’s rights movements. I would definitely be happy if it helped readers discover or rediscover Sarah and Angelina Grimké and the roles they played. I think every novelist wants her book to enlighten the mind in some way and be a carrier of ideas. My greatest hope, however, is for readers to take away a *felt* experience of the story, of what slavery might have been like for someone or what it was like back then for a woman without rights. I want the reader to feel as if he or she has participated in the interior lives of the characters and felt something of their yearnings, sufferings, joys, and braveries. Empathy—taking another’s experience and making it one’s own—is one of the most mysterious and noble transactions a human can have. It’s the real power of fiction. While in college, I studied Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of “the common heart,” a place inside of us where we share an intrinsic unity with all humanity. The idea has remained with me all these years. As a writer, I believe in it. The hope that this story would help us find a portal into that place is the most I could hope.

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## Discussion Questions

1. The title ***The Invention of Wings*** was one of the first inspirations that came to Sue Monk Kidd as she began the novel. Why is the title an apt one for Kidd's novel? What are some of the ways that the author uses the imagery and symbolism of birds, wings, and flight?
2. What were the qualities in Handful that you most admired? As you read the novel, could you imagine yourself in her situation? How did Handful continue her relentless pursuit of self and freedom in the face of such a brutal system?
3. After laying aside her aspirations to become a lawyer, Sarah remarks that the Graveyard of Failed Hopes is "an all-female establishment." What makes her say so? What was your experience of reading Kidd's portrayal of women's lives in the nineteenth century?
4. In what ways does Sarah struggle against the dictates of her family, society and religion? Can you relate to her need to break away from the life she had in order to create a new and unknown life? What sort of risk and courage does this call for?
5. The story of ***The Invention of Wings*** includes a number of physical objects that have a special significance for the characters: Sarah's fleur de lis button, Charlotte's story quilt, the rabbit-head cane that Handful receives from Goodis, and the spirit tree. Choose one or more of these objects and discuss their significance in the novel.
6. Were you aware of the role that Sarah and Angelina Grimke played in abolition and women's rights? Have women's achievements in history been lost or overlooked? What do you think it takes to be a reformer today?
7. How would you describe Sarah and Angelina's unusual bond? Do you think either one of them could have accomplished what they did on their own? Have you known women who experienced this sort of relationship as sisters?
8. Some of the staunchest enemies of slavery believed the time had not yet come for women's rights and pressured Sarah and Angelina to desist from the cause, fearing it would split the cause of abolition. How do you think the sisters should have responded to their demand? At the end of the novel, Sarah asks, "Is it ever right to sacrifice one's truth for expedience?"
9. What are some of the examples of Handful's wit and sense of irony, and how do they help her cope with the burdens of slavery?
10. Contrast Handful's relationship with her mother with the relationship between Sarah and the elder Mary Grimké. How are the two younger women formed—and malformed—by their mothers?
11. Kidd portrays an array of male characters in the novel: Sarah's father; Sarah's brother Thomas; Theodore Weld; Denmark Vesey; Goodis Grimke, Israel Morris,

Burke Williams. Some of them are men of their time, some are ahead of their time. Which of these male characters did you find most compelling? What positive and negative roles did they play in Sarah and Handful's evolvment?

12. How has your understanding of slavery been changed by reading ***The Invention of Wings***? What did you learn about it that you didn't know before?

13. Sarah believed she could not have a vocation and a marriage, both. Do you think she made the right decision in turning down Israel's proposal? How does her situation compare to Angelina's marriage to Theodore? In what way are women today still asking the question of whether they can have it all?

14. How does the spirit tree function in Handful's life? What do you think of the rituals and meanings surrounding it?

15. Had you heard of the Denmark Vesey slave plot before reading this novel? Were you aware of the extent that slaves resisted? Why do you think the myth of the happy, compliant slave endured? What were some of the more inventive or cunning ways that Charlotte, Handful and other characters rebelled and subverted the system?

16. ***The Invention of Wings*** takes the reader back to the roots of racism in America. How has slavery left its mark in American life? To what extent has the wound been healed? Do you think slavery has been a taboo topic in American life?

17. Are there ways in which Kidd's novel can help us see our own lives differently? How is this story relevant for us today?