

PUBLICATION

On My Bookshelf – "The Invention of Wings" by Sue Monk Kidd

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December 17, 2014

The Invention of Wings is an absolute must-read, particularly if you like historical fiction. The book takes place in the early nineteenth century in Charleston, South Carolina, and focuses on the wealthy Grimke household who, like other rich white families in town, rely on slaves to sustain their lavish lifestyle. Hetty "Handful" is a slave who yearns for life beyond the suffocating walls that enclose her and the other slaves. One of the Grimke's daughters, Sarah, aspires to be a lawyer and a judge like her father, but is limited by the restrictions placed on women. Before reading (listening to, actually, since I chose the audio version) this book, I had not fully comprehended the challenges of women in the South and the obsession with appearances as depicted in Sarah Grimke's story, along with the bravery it took to go against convention. Handful's narrative brings the atrocities of slavery to life in a way that is disturbing, but gives hope. If you listen to books, this is a great listen because you hear both Sarah's and Handful's voices. I did not realize until the end of the book that the Grimke sisters were actually real heroes in the abolitionist movement as well as early feminists.

On Sarah's eleventh birthday, she is presented with Handful, the slave daughter of Charlotte, as her very own slave, a gift she is unwilling to accept but unable to refuse. Sarah is also desperate for more than just the basic education that is available to girls to make them good wives and mothers. She spends much of her time in her father's forbidden library and longs to escape the constraints of the society in which she lives. Early on, Sarah recognizes that she is "afflicted with the worst female curse on earth, the need to mold myself to expectations."

Thus, Sarah and Handful are depicted as prisoners of their situation in different ways. As Handful says to Sarah: "My body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it's the other way round." Handful, as a slave, has no control over her life and can be literally bought and sold and given away as a gift. Her mother, Charlotte, is desperate to escape and plots and plans to buy freedom for her and her daughter. Sarah rebels in her own ways and teaches Handful to read, which is illegal in southern slave states.

This inspiring story of Sarah and Handful depicts their struggle to take control of their own worlds. Sarah and her younger sister, Angelina, work tirelessly as abolitionists and early feminists who paved the way for women's suffrage. The suppression of women is examined along with the tragic and hopeful lives of slaves. Sarah's bravery is depicted in her recognition that "to remain silent in the face of evil is itself a form of evil," and rather than just wish for slavery to end and for women to have rights, she does something about it.

The book follows Sarah and Handful for thirty-five years, alternating chapters about each. By mixing fact and fiction, Sue Monk Kidd has created an extremely well-written and compelling novel about the cruelty of slavery and the courageousness and resilience of both slaves and early abolitionists and feminists.