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Incantation



Synopsis

Estrella is a Marrano: During the time of the Spanish Inquisition, she is one of a community of Spanish Jews living double lives as Catholics. And she is living in a house of secrets, raised by a family who practices underground the ancient and mysterious way of wisdom known as kabbalah. When Estrella discovers her family's true identity--and her family's secrets are made public--she confronts a world she's never imagined, where new love burns and where friendship ends in flame and ash, where trust is all but vanquished and betrayal has tragic and bitter consequences. Infused with the rich context of history and faith, in her most profoundly moving work to date, Alice Hoffman's first historical novel is a transcendent journey of discovery and loss, rebirth and remembrance.

Book Information

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Paperback: 192 pages

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Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (137 customer reviews)

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Age Range: 12 - 17 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

The burning of Jewish books in the town square is the first portent that life for sixteen-year-old Estrella is going to change. Set in Spain during the Middle Ages, the story is about secrets and self-knowledge. Estrella's family are Conversos, who practice Judaism in secret at home and in a church where all of the congregation plus the priest are like themselves. As the persecution of Jews draws ever closer to Estrella's own family, she is told about their secret, given a ring to buy herself safe passage to Amsterdam if need be, and taught the rudiments of kabbalah by her learned

grandfather. This unlikely act is undoubtedly a gesture toward the current popularity of kabbalah and it does little to mar the credibility of the plot, consisting only of a few "kabbalistic" customs like wearing a red thread and learning the names of the ten gates of Paradise. More central to the story is Estrella/Esther's development from a carefree girl to a young woman fated to pass on her family's heritage virtually alone. As in other of Hoffman's books, nature and magic are intertwined. Estrella's mother is a dyer and a healer; her grandfather is a surgeon and a scholar. The witchcraft of which they are accused is practical magic, the kind that works not through the supernatural but through knowledge heightened by insight. Throughout the book, Estrella's mother teaches her about the natural world and how humans use it for good or evil. At the conclusion, after some horrific scenes of torture and burnings, she flees, having learned that "a Jew can never be attached to a place...We cannot have roots in the earth of any country, only in the garden that we carry inside us.

"A monster is hard to see and even harder to kill. It takes time to grow so huge, time to crawl up into the open air. People will tell you it's not there; you're imagining things. But a book is a book. Pages are pages. Hawks are hawks. Doves are doves. Hatred is always hatred." Estrella is Esther and her family is Marrano, caught during the Spanish Inquisition when Spanish Jews hid their heritage camouflaged as Spanish Catholics. Sixteen-year-old Estrella knows nothing of evils or monsters, nor is she aware that anyone can suddenly become an outcast. Estrella's life is full of hope and dreams of a happy future with her best friend, Catalina. Both girls have black hair and look so much alike. Catalina is the Crow and Estrella is the Raven, and the two plan, as sisters might, for the day when they will raise their children as friends. They know each other so well --- until the day the monster is brought to life in the town square. The day soldiers come into the plaza and publicly burn a rabbi's books is the day the town is poisoned. It becomes dangerous and full of fearful hate, the hate often used as protection. The soldiers reward those who turn against neighbors as they uncover the Conversos, who practice Judaism at home and in a church with a congregation of other Conversos. A mere accusation would suffice and seal the guilt; the accused would suffer unimaginable punishment and humiliation. For most of Estrella's life she is unaware of her family's true identity --- their greatest secret. Estrella never questions her private name (Esther), family traditions such as lighting candles before dinner and not eating pork, or her grandfather being a teacher. But Catalina does notice that Estrella always makes the sign of the cross backwards.

"I am someone I never would have imagined. A secret. A dream...body and soul..." Growing up in the small village of Encaflora, Spain, Estrella de Madrigal is aware of the Spanish Inquisition but

believes it has little to do with her. She and her family attend one of the Catholic churches in town and her brother is studying to be a priest. However, Estrella is forced to face the brutal reality of the Inquisition as Jews from the ghetto are murdered and she discovers her own family's secrets--they are Marranos, a community of Jews who public profess to Roman Catholicism while secretly practicing their Judaism and Kabbalah at home. Shortly after this momentous discovery, her family's secrets are made public and Estrella confronts a world she's never imagined, where neighbors turn on each other, where friendship ends in flame, and where betrayal has tragic and bitter consequences. To create a future for her family, Estrella must reach deep within herself and find sources of strength to craft a new reality. *Incantation*, Alice Hoffman's newest novel for young adults, introduces readers to a turbulent period in European history through the eyes of 16-year-old Estrella. Estrella enjoys spending time with her best friend Catalina, believing that their destiny is to marry and live next door to each other. "We thought we knew exactly what our lives were made of: still water, not a moving river." Fate, however, has different plans for Estrella and Catalina. In 1478, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella established the Spanish Inquisition in a bid to maintain Catholicism in their kingdoms and in 1500 the Inquisition arrived in Encaflora and snared Estrella and her family in its trap.

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