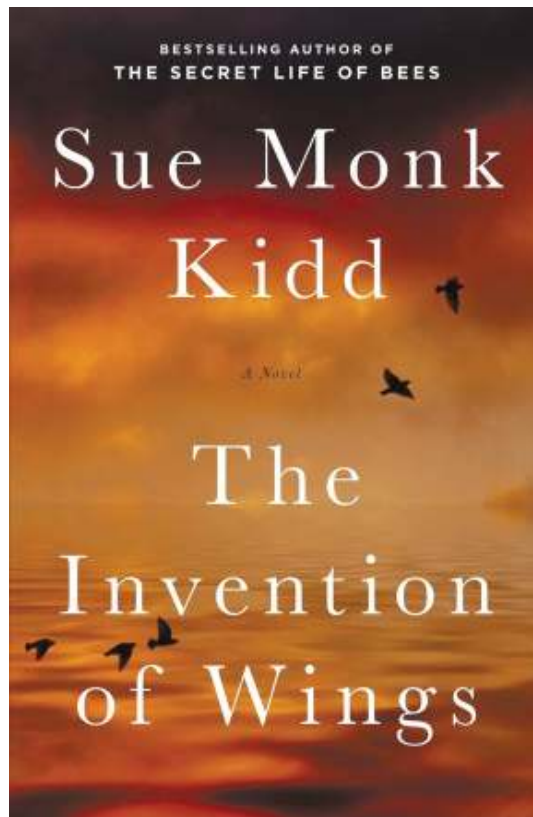


**DISCUSSION GUIDE**  
FOR  
SUE MONK KIDD'S  
***THE INVENTION OF WINGS***



**CREATED BY HWS FIRST YEAR SEMINAR 173**

## Some things to talk about ...

### Part 1

1. What prompted Sarah Grimké to teach Handful to read when Sarah clearly understood that it was frowned up – even illegal – to teach slaves to read and write?
2. Why did Handful risk writing letters outside the main house where others might see them? Why did she believe it was worth the risk of being beaten?
3. Do you believe that Handful cares about Sarah's well-being?
4. Sarah's attitude on her birthday was not one of a conventional 11-year-old in the American South. How would you have reacted if you were placed in her situation?
5. Handful's mother is very knowledgeable. What is the origin and significance of her stories of people who have wings?
6. How did Mary and Sarah's differing treatment of their waiting maids reflect their beliefs and allegiance to Southern traditions?
7. After Charlotte is punished, does her demeanor change? If so, in what ways?

### Part 2

1. Handful's mother has a clear goal of buying freedom for both herself and her daughter. Is the possibility of freedom realistic for the two?
2. When Sarah meets Burke Williams, does she change? If so, would you categorize the change as good or detrimental to her character?
3. Is Sarah a different person at the age of 20 than she was at 11? In what ways has Sarah remained true to the child she was? In what ways has she changed, for better and for worse?
4. What is the significance of Nina calling Sarah "Mother"? How does this affect the relationship between Sarah and her mother?
5. Handful takes it upon herself to research the cost of freeing a slave. How does the answer affect her?

### Part 3

1. Handful tells Sarah: "My body may be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it's the opposite." (pg. 201) This statement brings a lot to the table. In what ways is Handful correct? How would you react to this statement if you were in Sarah's shoes?
2. How would you characterize Sarah's relationship with her father? How did his death affect her?
3. How does Sarah's mother react to the death of her husband? Besides the heavy emotional toll, what are the economic and social consequences of losing a husband?
4. When Charlotte leaves the Grimké residence, what is Handful's emotional response?
5. Before her correspondence with Israel, Sarah's understanding of the Quaker religion is not that strong. In what ways does their exchange of letters deepen her understanding of that faith and affect her life course?

#### Part 4

1. According to Denmark Vesey and Handful, slave revolts are the only feasible way to free slaves. Do you agree? Why do Handful and Denmark believe this?
2. What is Sarah's initial response to Becky's gift of the locket? How does the knowledge that it was her mother's complicate that response?
3. Put yourself in Handful's place at the moment Denmark asked her to steal bullet molds. What would you do? What is Handful's moral dilemma?
4. Antebellum Charleston appears to be a small tight-knit community. How does Denmark Vesey's death impact the city?

#### Part 5

1. We learn that Charlotte tried to escape her new master on multiple occasions. In what ways do her experiences and suffering add to the depiction of slavery in the novel? Does it cast the Grimké household in a better light? Why or why not?
2. Why does Sarah decide to refuse Israel's offer of marriage? Was this choice wise? How does their relationship change as a result? What would you have done in her situation?

#### Part 6

1. Do you think Mrs. Grimke's decision to free Handful upon her death was a good idea? Why or why not?
2. What are your thoughts about the ending of the novel? Would you call it a happy ending?
3. Does Handful and Sky's escape open up a new life for them? How would they live their new life, if the story continued?

#### Summary Questions

1. Why did Southerners refer to slavery as their "peculiar situation?" How did Northerners' view differ?
2. Why is the novel called *The Invention of Wings*? What do the wings symbolize? How does the ending reflect this theme?
3. Slavery was part of Southern culture, but is long gone. Why do you think Sue Monk Kidd wrote about it? What was her goal?
4. Did you enjoy having two narrators? How did this structure affect your experience of the novel?
5. As Sarah and Handful grow older, what do they learn about society and how it hinders their aspirations?
6. Given the story of their lives as represented in this novel, do you feel that the Grimké sisters had a greater impact on abolition or on women's rights? Why?

## Themes to Consider

1. What role do quilts play in the novel? What is their significance to Handful and her mother?
2. How does the act of quilting “free” Handful and her mother?
3. Why do both Sarah and Handful turn to religion?
4. What does religion provide for Sarah and Handful? Does it help or hurt them, or both?
5. What role does religion play across the Charleston community?
6. Both Sarah and Handful experience limitations and confinements due to the existing inequality of society. What inequalities exist for Sarah? What inequalities exist for Handful? Are they comparable?
7. How does inequality function throughout the novel, and what impact does it have on Sarah and Handful and their aspirations?
8. What is the significance of the relationship between Sarah and Nina?
9. How does sisterhood affect Sarah and Nina? How does their strong relationship affect their actions?

## Important Themes in “The Invention of Wings” Guide to Discussion Questions

### Quilting

The act of quilting is a very prominent theme throughout the novel, as Charlotte spends much of her time making quilts that depict events from her life. Charlotte uses black triangles, which represent blackbird wings and signify freedom. Quilting not only allows Charlotte to escape her harsh reality under the reign of Missus, but also allows her to communicate and tell her own story, since she cannot read or write. Quilting becomes a soothing and freeing activity for Charlotte; and the quilt becomes a secret hiding spot for money, a source of protection and comfort for both Handful and her mother as they try to cope with their daily lives. Handful later adapts the idea of using a quilt as a hiding place to help Denmark Vesey safeguard a list of recruits for the planned slave revolt.

### Religion

For both Sarah and Handful, religion offers an escape from the constraints of their day-to-day lives. Sarah is able to identify with the Quakers, a group that shares her opposition to slavery. By identifying with the Quakers, Sarah gains knowledge and newfound hope that

she can change the norms of her society. Although she is shunned by the Charleston community when she returns home as a Quaker, religion remains an important source of hope and power that keeps her motivated when things get tough. Similarly, Handful relies heavily on Denmark Vesey's church, where many other slaves or former slaves are able to congregate and dream of freedom. Although the revolt fails, the church is a significant source of power that gives the slaves hope and motivation, and unites them. Because religion increasingly provides the slaves with power that threatens and can potentially change society as it is, the Charleston authorities come into Vesey's church and destroy it.

### **Inequality**

As Sarah and Handful grow up, they recognize the inequalities within their world. Sarah, who aspires to be a successful and educated lawyer like her brother, finds out that women ultimately do not receive support or encouragement to obtain positions that are considered masculine. As she realizes that her society is patriarchal, she is publicly criticized for not being married and following the traditional norms of women at the time. As a result, her public reputation and her fight for abolition are undermined and seen as less legitimate. Handful, simply having the skin color that she has, realizes that her situation is very unfair. Handful grows up seeing other slaves get beaten, and she sees how hard her mother works and still receives scolding and beatings. She discovers that she is not equal to Sarah; she is Sarah's property. Handful sees this inequality more and more as she grows older and consequently joins her mother's attempts to break household objects as a symbolic escape from the oppression. As Sarah grows older, she also sees the inequality that exists in her society; so she temporarily abandons her family and strives to become a Quaker minister. Society's inequalities anger and frustrate both Sarah and Handful, driving them to change and escape their realities.

### **Sisterhood**

The relationship between Sarah and Nina grows significantly throughout the novel, and their bond compels each to continue to follow her dreams and fight for what she believes. Sarah, practically a maternal figure to Nina, teaches Nina her way of thinking, her opposition to slavery, and her general dissatisfaction with society. Sarah infuses her with her own ideas, and Nina grows up to embody the same characteristics and beliefs as Sarah. This ultimately enables Nina to become another major advocate for abolition. Although Nina and Sarah experience times apart from each other, and they're not always as close as they were as children, their bond is a powerful and supportive force that inspires and enables their fight for to end slavery.

## **The Power of Symbols**

1. How did the spirit tree influence Handful and Charlotte's relationship? What does it stand for?
2. What did Charlotte's theft of the green silk cloth from Missus represent to Missus, and what did it mean to Charlotte?
3. What is the meaning of the button for Sarah? When she received the button once again, how did it affect her? Why was it significant that Handful saved it for her?

4. Sarah was floating in the ocean during the time that her father was dying? In what ways was this life-changing for Sarah?
5. Why did Charlotte add black triangles to every quilt? What do they represent?

## **Important Symbols**

### **Guide to Discussion Questions**

**Spirit Tree:** In *The Invention of Wings*, the spirit tree is a symbol of safety and comfort for Handful and Charlotte. It's very personal to them, and no one else knows about it. The spirit tree connects them, even when Charlotte disappears toward the middle of the novel. It brings them hope and remains very important to Handful throughout the novel.

**Silver Button:** The silver button represents Sarah's hopes and desires for her life. When she is young, she wants to be a lawyer. When she learns that no one in her family supports her, she becomes depressed and throws away the button. However, Handful kept the button for Sarah. When Sarah is upset over Burke Williams' betrayal and the end of their engagement, Handful returns the button to her. The silver button comes to symbolize how Sarah has developed throughout the book and how far she has come.

**Water:** Water is a symbol for both Sarah and Handful. When Sarah was with her father while he was dying, she had a very personal and important moment for herself in the water. She was floating in the ocean all alone and felt a calmness and freedom she had never known. Even though she had a lot on her mind, for a moment that all went away. Sarah finally felt alive for the first time in a very long time, and it became a life-changing moment for her. It gave her a new hope and meaning for her life. For Handful, water became a symbol of hope and escaping from the Grimké house. At night time when she would sleep outside of Sarah's door, she would always go look out the window to see the water in the harbor.

**Green Silk Cloth:** Charlotte steals a piece of green silk cloth from Missus. Charlotte knew she couldn't use it for her quilts and risk Missus seeing it, but she still stole it. For Charlotte, this represented a type of rebellion. She didn't want Missus to have control over her, and this gave her the sense that she could still do what she wanted.

**Blackbirds:** Blackbirds represent flight and being able to go wherever you want. Charlotte added black triangles to her quilts to represent bird wings, and the idea of freedom. That conveyed her hope that she and Handful would eventually get out and become free forever.

## Important Quotations

Identify the speaker and describe the meaning of each quotation.  
For discussion: How do these quotations connect to major themes in the novel?

- A. "There's no pain on earth that doesn't crave a benevolent witness."
- B. "I'd chosen the regret I could best live with, that's all."
- C. "There's a frightful muteness that dwells at the center of all unspeakable things, and I had found my way into it."
- D. "I didn't know how to be in the world without her."
- E. "I told myself reading was a kind of freedom, the only one I could give."
- F. "To remain silent in the face of evil is itself a form of evil."
- G. "People say love gets fouled in a difference as big as ours."
- H. "I would not be a pressed flower in a book after all."
- I. "The sorry truth is you can walk your feet to blisters, walk till kingdom-come, and you will never outpace your grief."
- J. "I have another mind for what I know is me."

## Answers

- A. Sarah Grimké. After her father tells her that she can never be an attorney, her mother urges her to accept her lot; Handful overhears. (p. 81)
- B. Sarah Grimké. She turns down Israel Morris' marriage proposal in order to pursue a vocation as a Quaker minister. (p. 295)
- C. Sarah Grimké. Despite fighting against her family's beliefs in slavery, she realizes that she, too, has unconsciously accepted the master/slave roles in her attitudes towards Handful when she finds that Handful has bathed in the copper tub. (p. 115)
- D. Hetty "Handful" Grimké. Her mother has disappeared after being arrested by the City Guard, then escaping. Handful feels the loss as tantamount to a loss of self. (p. 140)
- E. Sarah Grimké. Education is one thing that can never be taken away from someone, and Sarah wants to be able to give Handful this right. By teaching Handful how to read and write, Sarah is helping Handful grow and fulfilling her promise to Charlotte to help free Handful. (p. 278)

- F. Israel Morris. Quakers actively protest through boycotting cotton and voicing assertions that slavery was becoming worse due to all those who do not acknowledge the problem. (p. 194)
- G. Hetty “Handful” Grimké. She explains the complicated symbiotic relationship she shared with Sarah. When Handful was first “given” to Sarah, she felt uncomfortable with the love she received; however, Sarah’s appreciation and willingness to teach her made Handful love her. (p. 54)
- H. Sarah Grimké. In anticipation of an engagement to Burke Williams, Sarah feels she is avoiding the fate of her great-aunt, Amelia Jane; the metaphor is Sarah’s mother’s. (p. 103)
- I. Hetty “Handful” Grimké. After her mother left, Handful obsessively walked a circuit in the yard, grieving. But walking in circles cannot provide an escape from loss. (p. 146)
- J. Denmark Vesey. He explicitly differentiates between himself and what a slave master would want him to be. (p. 172)

## **The Importance of Home: Some Thoughts**

Throughout *The Invention of Wings*, the idea of home is put in question. When one thinks of home, it is not only the image of a physical house. Neither Sarah Grimké nor Handful experience a true home for much of their lives. On an emotional level Sarah is not content with her surroundings in the Grimké family home and the segregation of space that reinforces the master/slave roles. Handful only experiences a true home with her mother in their slave quarters, and later in Charlotte’s cellar room.

The slave quarters proved to be more of a home than Sarah’s house. Handful’s relationship with her mother is much stronger than Sarah’s relationship with hers. As a result of this relationship and almost out of necessity, Handful finds herself in a euphoric state when given the opportunity to be with her mother. Whether it be short interactions or while working on quilts, Handful experiences a sense of security with her mother, represented by the cellar room that her mother decorates as a sort of retreat for the two of them.

Sarah Grimké’s issues at home begin at a very young age. While at home, she experiences two traumatic incidents. When she’s 4, Sarah witnesses a slave being beaten; traumatized, she becomes temporarily mute, only to develop a stutter when she resumes speaking. The stutter gradually goes away. But at age 11, when she’s deprived of access to Father’s library because she taught Handful to read, it returns and she retreats to her room. Even within the walls of Sarah’s bedroom, she becomes a shell of herself. “I didn’t break my seclusion again. Instead, I took refuge in it.” She frequently goes on hunger strikes and refuses to talk to her mother. In the end, the reader is not surprised to see Sarah walk out the door and never return to live in the Grimké residence.