

**Directions:** Before you begin your reading of the novel, read the following remarks and questions to get a sense of the novel's themes and characters. Then, as you do a close reading of the novel, make notes about these themes—and others you may find. Record your interactions with the text. **You will take reading quizzes and write paragraphs related to these questions after reach of the six parts of the novel. When we are finished with the novel, you will turn in your reading notes.**

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- Sarah and Handful battle for different kinds of freedom. Handful remarks to Sarah, “My body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it’s the other way around.” How is the issue of freedom developed in these two characters?
- This novel joins a tradition of depicting slavery in an open and unflinching way, though it is about a form of it perhaps less known to most readers: urban slavery. How is urban slavery different from the plantation slavery that is more well known?
- Two of the great movements of the twentieth century—Civil Rights and feminism— were fueled by early 19<sup>th</sup> century innovations of thought about abolition and women’s rights, two major motifs in the novel. What messages about these movements does the novel convey to readers?
- In an interview about her book, Sue Monk Kidd said the following: "Racism is the great wound and sin of the South and indeed, the great wound and original sin of America. Two hundred and forty-six years of slavery was an American holocaust, and its legacy is racism. I don't think we've fully healed the wound or eradicated the sin. For all the great strides we've made, that legacy still lingers." How does her novel reflect this idea?
- How do Sarah, Angelina, and Handful illustrate the idea of girls and women asserting their voices and thinking beyond the time in which they live?
- The relationships between mothers and daughters and between sisters are explored in the two parallel mother/daughter relationships in the novel. What connections and conclusions can be made about these female relationships?
- Storytelling happens in many ways in the novel. How does Handful’s mother, Charlotte, tell her story? How does that become a symbol throughout the story? What does it mean to Charlotte and to Handful?
- Kidd tries to convey the idiom, dialect, and cadence of the language of the day on paper. Kidd said the following about finding the right voices for her story: "I'd read the real life Grimké sisters' diaries and essays, and they gave me an extraordinary glimpse into their lives, but 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. Writing her voice was all about loosening it. I decided that my task was to tap into her inner life and set her free to speak from that timeless place, as well as from the time in which she lived." How authentic do the voices of Sarah and Handful seem to be? What effect does "hearing" their voices have on you and your understanding/appreciation of the story?

- Sarah and Handful's relationship begins when they are children and continues into adulthood. Kidd stated: "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. Their relationship is disfigured by so many things: guilt, shame, pity, resentment, defiance, estrangement... I tried to create a relationship that allows for all of that, yet also has room for surprise, redemption, and even love." Is their relationship a friendship? What kind of "disfigurement" occurs and why? What kind of "redemption" is achieved and how?

### Key Questions:

1. What does the title "The Invention of Wings" symbolize? How are wings used as a central metaphor in the story?
2. Kidd said this about her title: "I discovered an American black folktale about people in Africa being able to fly and then losing their wings when captured into slavery, and that notion began to slip into the story in different ways. Sometimes, while writing, I listened to songs the slaves sang: "Now let me fly... now let me fly, now let me fly way up high.""
3. How does this relate to other works you have read this year: *The Crucible*? *Caleb's Crossing*? *The Scarlet Letter*? What relationships or connections do you find between these works? What do these connections add to your understanding of *The Invention of Wings*?
4. When asked what she wants people to take away from reading *The Invention of Wings*, Kidd said:  
"I most want the reader to take away a felt experience of the story, of what slavery might have been like for someone or what it was like for a woman before she had any 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.  
"That's a large hope. 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. In the Author's Note at the end of the novel, I quote some words by Professor Julius Lester, words I kept visible on my desk as I wrote: 'History is not just facts and events. History is also a pain in the heart and we repeat history until we are able to make another's pain in the heart our own.'"
5. What experiences, characters, and ideas connect this novel to *Caleb's Crossing*, *The Crucible*, and/or *The Scarlet Letter*?