

Green Angel

by Alice Hoffman

About the Book

Alice Hoffman introduces us to Green just a few weeks before her sixteenth birthday, a time when “as far as [she] was concerned, the future was a book [she] could write to suit [herself] ... All was right with the world, and [her] place in it was assured.” Then suddenly, Green’s gentle mother, strong father, and wild, beautiful younger sister perish in a catastrophic fire in the nearby city. Green is left alone. This novel chronicles her grieving and others’ response to the disaster. At the center of the novel is Green’s emotional journey — true, powerful and unforgettable.

Questions for Discussion

Style/Voice

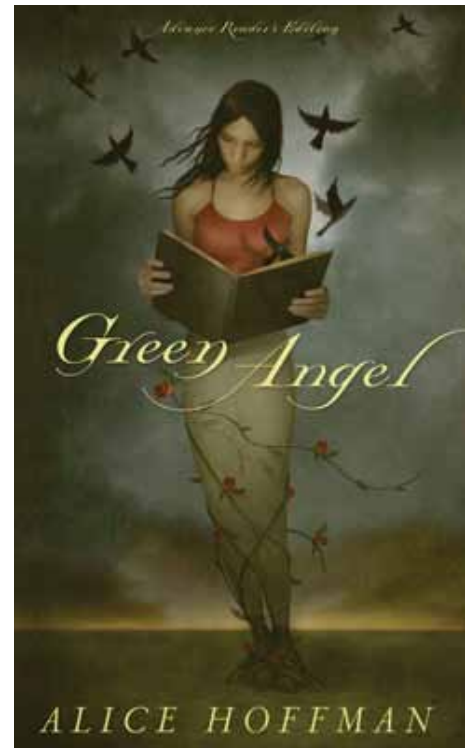
1. Alice Hoffman uses figurative language throughout the book to set mood (for example: “At twilight, dusk wove across the meadows like a dream of the next day to come.”); to describe the setting (“We lived within sight of the city which glowed like a diamond at night and shone like silver in the afternoon.”); to define character (“Aurora was made of laughter and moonlight.”). Find and discuss examples of similes, metaphors and other phrases that inspire the ways you imagine the story.
2. The novel is told in the first person. In order for us, as readers, to believe in this story, we must trust Green’s narrative. How honest do you think she is? Why do you trust her?

The Story

1. As Green’s family leaves to go to the city to sell their produce, Green’s mother says: “We are leaving you behind because you are the one who’s needed most of all.” Green accepts this to mean that she has to tend to the garden, but is there a deeper meaning to these words. Why didn’t the entire family go to the city that day? Do you think Green’s mother fears something might happen?
2. Green lives miles from the city yet the devastation reaches the town and countryside where she lives. Trees lose their leaves, crops are destroyed, and layers of ash cover the ground. What kind of catastrophic event could have had such a widespread effect?
3. After the fire, Green goes through a grieving process that takes her from disbelief, to hope that her family has survived, to anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, deep depression, and finally to a change that allows her to cry, accept, and start anew. Look for examples in Green’s behavior that depict these various stages of grief.
4. What importance does the building of the three stone memorials play in Green’s life after the fire?
5. Before the fire, Green had a normal family: her mom, dad and sister. After the fire, Ash has to create a family in order to get past her anger and sadness. Who are the members of Ash’s new family, and how does she care for them?

Character

1. “Aurora slept without blankets or pillows, her pale hair streaming... I couldn’t get a good night’s



sleep unless I had three feather pillows under my head, and two down quilts covering me.” Aurora and Green are different in many ways. Does that often happen in families? Describe their relationship. How do they feel about each other?

2. Green understates her own accomplishments and qualities and seems to over-praise those of Aurora’s. “I was the least among them, nothing special,” she says. “Aurora,” she tells us “was as wild as she was beautiful.” Green loves and adores her sister, yet it is clear she feels of lesser value. Do people in families often have set beliefs about their place in the family?

3. Green seems somehow magical. “The shopkeeper and his wife tested my abilities to distinguish by touch. If I could identify silver and gold, what else might I know? Sure enough I could tell green tea from black, navy beans from kidney beans, earth from ashes, honesty from deceit.” Can seeing emotional truths seem like magic?

4. In the course of her grieving, Green changes in many ways. At some point, she is so different from the girl she once was that she gives herself a new name: Ash. Follow the steps in the transition from Green to Ash. How does Green’s neighbor help Green to find her way back — to let go of Ash and be herself once more? Compare Green with Ash physically, emotionally, and psychologically. What do the two names mean to you?

5. What is the metaphor of Green losing her sight? Why didn’t she protect her eyes or go to her mother’s medicine cabinet to use the medicines and salves to soothe and cure her eyes?

6. If a sparrow is not a sparrow if it cannot fly, and a hawk is not a hawk if it cannot hunt, and a greyhound has to run, and Diamond has to look for his mother, then what is it that defines Green/Ash? What does she have to do to become whole?

Theme

1. “It made sense for me to work in the garden, for me to be the one who stayed home, but I was angry all the same. When my family set out to leave, they called good-bye, but I didn’t answer.” Later Green will regret the fact that she did not say good-bye to her family. Have you ever behaved this way? Did you regret it? After the events of September 11, 2001, have you changed the way you act in such situations?

2. How are the kids at the Forgetting Shack dealing with their losses? How is this the same as Green’s way of coping? How is it different? Compare their use of alcohol, drugs, and frenzied dancing with Ash’s self-tattooing, sewing thorns into her clothing, chopping off of her hair, and isolating herself in her home.

3. Green is eventually able to come through the crisis, but Heather Jones doesn’t. What is the difference between them? Would you be able to survive the physical and emotional challenges of Green’s situation?

4. “There were good people in town who were helping out their neighbors, and others who saw an opportunity for greed. ... Some people were busy cleaning the ashes out of the schoolhouse, while others were selling overpriced lanterns and oil and counting their profits. Honorable or not, most people were desperate for good fortune.” After a tragedy of the magnitude of the one in Green Angel, people respond differently. Discuss the many stories that we heard after the events of September 11, 2001. Acts of heroism — large and small — filled the newspapers. Miracles became daily events. What actions did you, your family, and your community take?

5. At the end of the novel Green once more begins to believe that her future is a book she can write for herself. But first, she has to tell this story. Why is it important for us all to share our personal stories, in good times and in bad times?

Also available by Alice Hoffman:

Aquamarine

Indigo

This discussion guide was prepared by Clifford Wohl, Educational Consultant.