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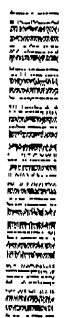
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TENDER MERCIES

A Love Story for the AIDS generation

Alice Hoffman has been dreaming ever since she finished her latest novel, *At Risk* (Putnam's). When the dreams stop, it will be time for her to start writing again.

Though only thirty-six, Hoffman has seen this cycle of writing, dreaming, and writing again repeat itself many times. Prolific (seven novels, numerous screenplays and reviews) and disciplined ("I treat writing as a job"), she has become America's most accomplished author of literary fiction for women who, perhaps, read too much. Her books blend magical and realistic elements in complex family portraits; two recent novels, both well-received critically, show Hoffman's unique turf. In *White Horses* (1982), narcoleptic Teresa struggles to gnaw through an incestuous tie to her charismatic brother; and in Nantucket-based *Illumination Night* (1987), Vonny, a maddening potter, goes agoraphobic and kills a child with her car while, next door, a teenage girl has an affair with a giant and a grandmother is trying to fly. Written with dream-like intensity, attentive to the tiniest shifts in each character's inner life, these books aren't exactly beach reading. But *At Risk*—a story about AIDS—is going to look right at home in the beach bag next to the jug of tanning oil, on the subway, in the beauty-salon chair. It will likely be Hoffman's crossover hit. The screenplay is already finished.

Set in *Morrow*, a fictional New England town, *At Risk* follows what happens when Amanda, an eleven-year-old gymnast with Mary Lou Retton potential, learns she has AIDS; worse, that she contracted it five years earlier from a contaminated blood transfusion; worse still, that she's going downhill fast. Fleshing out the tale are Amanda's mother, the horsily comforting Polly; her astronomer father, Ivan; and her little brother, Charlie. Charlie is clearly Hoffman's favorite: he's the only one who gets to have a richly symbolic dream—of himself as a tyrannosaurus rex, wandering the frozen earth en route to species extinction. Also, he's the only one who gets to learn anything from Amanda's mortal illness.

"This is the first time I've dealt with interpersonal relations in a normal family," Hoffman says, keeping her head tilted toward her baby's gurgling and her dog's sporadic barks. Perhaps this "normal" novel is a product of Hoffman's increasing domesticity. First son Jake is five now; baby Zachary was born in March; husband, Tom Martin, also works at

home, writing screenplays and helping care for the boys. "I don't do much in the outside world," she says with a laugh. "Gee, I don't do much besides see my kids. I don't clean out my closets. I don't even write letters."

The specter of AIDS seems far away from this rambling house filled with family noises, scrubbed pine furniture, and shiny floors. "That's just it," Hoffman says. "AIDS is so sudden; it comes from nowhere. I've written 'issue' books—about incest, agoraphobia—but *At Risk* is more immediate, more rooted in reality than they are. It's rooted in the question, 'What would I do if my son went to school with a child with AIDS?'"

to guess how each character will fare as Amanda's tragedy gains velocity and becomes the whole town's, or world's, concern.

Hoffman is quick to point out that *At Risk* is not a book about AIDS; it's about the characters. Even so, the lessons eight-year-old Charlie absorbs are the ones she'd like adult readers to take in, especially the "liberals who are shocked at themselves for having bad thoughts about AIDS. *At Risk* says it's O.K. to have those bad thoughts. It's just not O.K. to act on them. This is a book about acting humanely." Whether readers will pick up her message is unclear. It is clear that no one will resist Amanda, the stricken preteen, and that

"It's O.K. to have bad thoughts. It's just not O.K. to act on them."

The dog yips. The baby cries. Hoffman falls completely silent, then resumes. "The adult characters in the book represent the different aspects of how I responded when I asked myself what I'd do. I was shocked at my negative feelings, and the book is how I worked those feelings out."

Unlike the characters in Hoffman's previous books, the people of *Morrow* are symbols more than complete selves. Except for Charlie, they don't dream, and they act on such easy-to-read emotions as maternal love, sibling hate, and fear of contagion. Since the end of the story is known at its start (no reader will look for a magical cure for AIDS), our only challenge is

At Risk could command as much Kleenex as *Love Story*. But, if readers and audiences weep for Amanda, Hoffman hopes they'll weep for gay men, AIDS' far likelier victims. "This is a scary time," she says, waving her arm in an arc to suggest the whole world's vulnerability to the disease.

For Hoffman, the recent years have been a time of grappling with that fear and of confronting a flicker of doubt about the role of art in the face of a plague. As she explains it, "I know writing's important. But sometimes social action is more important. *At Risk* was something I could do." —SARAH WRIGHT

("PATA" continued on page 66)



Alice Hoffman, America's most accomplished author of literary fiction for women who read too much.