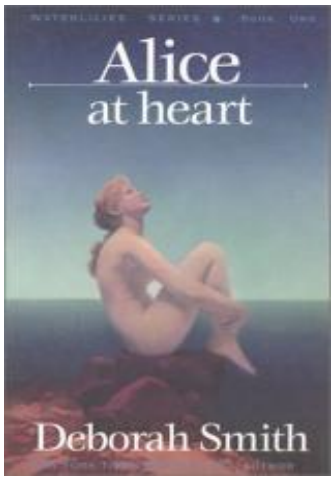
Alice at Heart

by Deborah Smith



About the Book

Quiet, mysterious, web-toed Alice Riley has long been the black sheep of her mother's self-righteous family. When Alice rescues a drowning girl in the freezing water of Lake Riley, high in the Georgia Appalachians, her unusual abilities are exposed. Alice can remain underwater for extraordinary periods of time and locate submerged objects. She also realizes that through some natural telepathic ability she can link minds with strangers, particularly salvage diver Griffin Randolph. Alice sends a message to Griffin across the Atlantic, also saving him from a drowning accident.

These unique occurrences, coupled with the sudden attention from the media and townsfolk, confuse the reclusive Alice. The dazzling Bonavendier sisters --- who claim to be half-sisters to Alice --- enter the picture at an awards ceremony for Alice and lure her to beautiful Sainte's Pointe Island. When Alice arrives, she discovers that she and Griffin have a remarkable bond, that she and the sisters may have a common mermaid ancestor, and that a dispute between her family and Griffin's remains unresolved.

Realistic yet magical, **Alice at Heart** is a powerful story of discovery and unification.

Discussion Guide

1. The author playfully suggests that reality is difficult to determine: "It was said they'd secluded themselves even more after murdering Undiline McEvers Randolph --- their own distant cousin from Scotland --- and her blue-blooded Georgia husband. But that had been nearly thirty-five years ago, and who knew what was truth and what was gossip anymore?" (p. 18) What parts of the story are difficult to separate from reality? Do you think it's easy to determine what qualifies as the truth?

2. The public responds to Alice: "Tell us, Ms. Riley. How did you do something no one can do?/ Tell us, Ms. Riley. How did you pull off this hoax? And why?/ "It's not a hoax," I told them. "It's just what I can do." (p. 29) Why do you think

people, when confronted with the inexplicable, assume the worst? Do you think miracles are possible?

3. Although not conscious of this at first, Alice's journey to Sainte's Pointe Island is ultimately one of self-discovery. One part of this involves tracing her family roots. She finds details about her mother: "You look like her, around the mouth, and in the shape of your face," Dr. Abernathy went on kindly. "And in the soul in you eyes. You're a beautiful young woman." (p. 197) Why is Alice's family lineage so important to her? Is family history important to you? Contrast Alice's concerns with Griffin's. What's most important to him?

4. With unsurpassable beauty, wealth, charm and fantastic abilities, the Water People seem like Mary Poppins: Practically perfect in every way possible. Yet this "perfection" doesn't extend to everything. We learn that the Bonavendier father "had, after all, decreed as a young man that the Bonavendier family would no longer prey on Randolph ships. Until his generation, elegant piracy had been not only a Bonavendier birthright but also a duty." (p. 167) Besides admitting that piracy is wrong, what other human frailties do the sisters admit to having? Can you think of any they exhibit but don't see themselves?

5. The Water People and the Land People, or "Landers" as Mara derisively calls them, tend to marry among their own kind. But Undiline (Water) and Porter Randolph (Land) fell in love at first sight. ("A Randolph, publicly smitten with ONE OF THEM." p. 90) This is one of several unconventional relationships depicted in the story. Describe the others. Why do you think the author included these? Do you think love can overcome outside obstacles?

6. "Ali. He named me by his own shorthand, as if I had always been some special person, known to him but unknown to myself. I couldn't speak. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and adoration." (p. 191) Why is Alice so grateful for this nickname? What role do all of the names play in this story? Do you think your name is significant?

7. The Bonavendier sisters and Alice have many similarities. "All of us standing here today are linked by the most amazing destiny. We have our father's eyes." (p. 55) How do the sisters and Alice differ? How is each Bonavendier sister unique? With whom do you most identify? Why?

8. Charm and seduction play a vital role in **Alice at Heart**. Alice wonders, "Where do I fit in? Who has seduced me more, my sisters, or Griffin?" (p. 219) Who do you think seduced whom? How much control is lost when we are seduced? Do you prefer to seduce or be seduced?

9. "All his life he'd fought a secret fear of the ocean." This describes Griffin (p. 34). Contrast this with Alice's disposition. What other contrasts exist between the women and the men in this story? Between the Water People and the Land People? Do you consider yourself more like a "Water" person or a "Land" person?

10. "He thought my own parents had me 'fixed' as a child. Freed of deformity, Lilith. And he clearly could no' accept even the smallest 'deformity' in his son. That's when I knew I could never tell him the rest about myself." (p. 274) What is Undiline discovering here? Do you believe people should change for their loved ones? If so, how much?

11. The author chooses to head two chapters with the following quote from Lilith: "Land People fight and struggle and yearn to find magic in their lives. Water People hide behind that magic, but realize the loneliness of it." (p. 51 and p. 163) Why is this so significant? How does this relate to people you know?

12. "Your mother almost convinced him anything is possible. He loved her like his life. But there was no room for imagination in him. Or faith." These words are spoken by C.A. Randolph (p. 240). What connection does faith have with imagination in the story? What about in your life?

Author Bio

Deborah Smith is the nationally bestselling, award-winning author of 31 novels in romance, women's fiction, and general list fiction. Her 1996 novel, **A Place to Call Home**, made the *New York Times* list. There are currently over 2 million copies of her books in print. She calls her novels "big, romantic, southern family stories." She made publishing news last year for signing a 7-figure contract with Little, Brown & Company, New York.

Her current novels are **On Bear Mountain** (Little, Brown), **THE STONE FLOWER GARDEN** (Little, Brown), and **Alice at Heart**, a southern literary fantasy, from BelleBooks. She's a sixth-generation native Georgian and lives in the north Georgia mountains with her husband, four cats, three dogs, and way too many giant goldfish. She acts as editorial director for BelleBooks.

Critical Praise

"Alice, an ugly duckling with webbed feet who never grew into a swan, is taking a frigid winter swim in Lake Riley, high in the Georgia Appalachians, when she has a vision of a drowning diver. She sends Griffin Randolph a mental message to breathe and establishes a telepathic link. At the same time a little girl falls into the icy lake on the opposite shore, and, amazingly enough, Alice is able to save her, but the rescue puts her unhappily in the spotlight and under suspicion. Then the three glamorous Bonavendier sisters of Sainte's Point Island show up at the awards ceremony and inform Alice that she's their father's posthumous daughter. When Alice arrives at the island, she discovers that she and Griffin have a mysterious bond, that a long-standing enmity separates his family and hers, and that the Bonavendiers' past includes a mermaid great-grandmother and accusations of piracy. Readers of Alice Hoffman will enjoy Smith's surprisingly convincing blend of romance and magical realism."

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