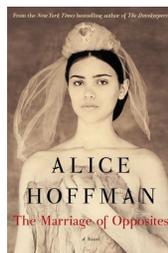


That Noel accompanies her in this scheme is one of many unexpected twists in **Crooked Heart**. He and Vee aren't the only confidence tricksters in the book. Another is Donald, Vee's son, whose heart murmur has not only rendered him unfit for service but also provided yet another way to make money.

It doesn't spoil the story to reveal that everyone's plans go awry. The unforeseen consequences give the book its narrative momentum. The tension flags at times, especially in sections focusing on Donald, but **Crooked Heart** is still an entertaining and poignant English comedy of bad manners.

—MICHAEL MAGRAS

THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES



By Alice Hoffman
Simon & Schuster
\$27.99, 384 pages
ISBN 9781451693591
Audio, eBook available

HISTORICAL FICTION

Atmospheric, moody and evocative—these words describe Alice Hoffman's latest achievement, **The Marriage of Opposites**. And that is no accident, because they also accurately describe the 19th-century artistic movement known as Impressionism, founded by Camille Pissarro, the third son Rachel Pomié bore to her second husband, Frédérick. (Altogether, Rachel had nine children, an accomplishment for any heroine, but Rachel is a strong character.)

Hoffman tells the story of the painter's life through the drama of his mother's concerns. The story takes place first on the island of St. Thomas, where Rachel is caught up in the drama of her scandalous second marriage and the troubles facing her best friend, Jestine. Later, the family (or some of it) returns to their home country of France, a long-held dream for these French-Jewish exiles.

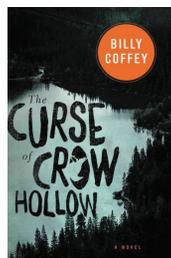
One would think that after 30-odd books, Hoffman might have exhausted her glossary, but **The Marriage of Opposites** is a treasure

trove of expression, color on color and emotion on emotion. Fittingly for a book about an artist, color is never far from the spotlight. Pissarro is "greedy for all the color in the world," and remembers November on the island, when "the dusk sifted down like black powder." Nature claims its fair share of the vocabulary—trees and birds and hills—and Hoffman seems always up to the task of freshly describing the latest artistic excitement.

Doing justice to the individuals in her tale is harder to accomplish—being real people, they must be unmistakably specific, sometimes in off-putting ways. Still, somehow Hoffman manages this as well, spinning a fresh tale of human error and achievement. This subject has found the right author at the right time, and no one who reads this story will forget it.

—MAUDE McDANIEL

THE CURSE OF CROW HOLLOW



By Billy Coffey
Thomas Nelson
\$15.99, 416 pages
ISBN 9780718026776
Audio, eBook available

CHRISTIAN FICTION

The line between mainstream and Christian fiction gets thinner and thinner. That's because the quality of writing by identifiably Christian authors gets better and better. There has always been a strong thread of Christian theology running through mainstream fiction, from Flannery O'Connor to Marilynne Robinson. The ironic key to this successful wedding of religion and high art has always been the subtlety of the moral of the story, which must be subordinate to the storyteller's art. The same principle elevates the novels of Virginia author Billy Coffey (*The Devil Walks in Mattingly*).

In the first line of the book, Coffey's hillbilly narrator invites his accidental guest (that would be us, the readers) to "come on out of that sun" and set a spell. The spell is immediate. We are altogether

bewitched by the teller, by his lyrical telling and by the tale itself, whose darkness is infernal. How is it that Coffey convinces us that the tiny population of Crow Holler, Virginia—nestled in the remote depths of the Blue Ridge—possesses so much significance, not only as a microcosm of humans as a whole, but as a prime example of the essential flaws and virtues of human nature? The tides of events and emotions running through the book pull us right under as Coffey tells the story of a small town where young girls begin suffering from mysterious symptoms.

The fate of the daughters of Crow Hollow—cursed by the witch Alveretta one night, up at her bad place on the mountain—becomes our own fate. What happens to Sheriff Bucky, or to that preacher's boy John David, or to the witch herself, becomes a moral obsession to us over the course of reading **The Curse of Crow Hollow**. Everything

is at stake in this battle between good and evil—including the identity of the narrator, revealed at last. To Christians and non-Christians alike, this roaring tale will leave a powerful mark.

—MICHAEL ALEC ROSE

CROOKED



By Austin Grossman
Mulholland
\$26, 368 pages
ISBN 9780316198516
eBook available

ALTERNATE HISTORY

The trick to a good alternate history, particularly one that's trying to be as impish and unpredictable as **Crooked**, is walking a delicious but delicate line between the weird and the plausible. You don't want the story to veer into territory so unbe-

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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