Sexton: There has been an explosion of women fiction writers onto the literary scene since you've started publishing, and now we have the subgenre of the birth of chick lit. How do you feel about this term: Do you want to be marketed as a women's writer?

Hoffman: I think that women writers are often marginalized whether as chick lit, or gothic, or because their work is about domestic life. People have said, "Do you consider yourself a women's writer." No one would ever ask a man, "Do you consider yourself a men's writer?" By definition it's kind of an offensive question because I think it's always O.K. to put down women in every capacity, especially as artists, so chick lit, I think, is a way to kind of reduce, to take everything from very commercial, to romantic and funny light fiction, to literary work, and just dump them all together into one ghetto.

Sexton: I feel like your work and its sense of place has a correspondence with a lot of Southern Fiction. Do you feel that influence?

Hoffman: When I went to graduate school my professor, Albert Guerard, was a Faulkner specialist and had written extensively about him. When I first read Faulkner, I had that experience of when you read something great and you feel it. I felt like my head was being blown off. The way he has of using language to make you feel that you are in a place and in a character's mind — his work is so much about feeling rather than intellectualizing and thinking. It affected me hugely at the time. I think it still does to this day. For me, he is the greatest American writer. That tradition of emotionalism is something that I look toward myself; maybe that's why in some ways my work corresponds to Southern writers. Many of my friends up north are Southern women, and I love the stories they tell and the way they tell stories. I do read a lot of contemporary authors, including Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith and Ellen Gilchrist. I love them. Their way of storytelling with such an emotional content always interests me.

Sexton: How do you feel about the reading group guides that follow at the end of your books? Who writes them? Do you get to approve them? It's interesting to think about how these may have evolved.

Hoffman: I missed out on the whole book club phenomenon. As a younger person and as a reader, all of the books I found out about, I found out about through friends. I think the book club is just an extension of that — you find out about the books you love from friends. I do have approval over the guides, and in my experience it has mostly been librarians who have written the guides; with children's books, specialists in children education. They're really good at what they do, and I think it's great to
Sexton: You’ve been writing children’s and young adult books for some time now and have often spoken about your commitment to young readers. Do you approach a young adult novel differently than your other work?

Hoffman: You decide the same way you decide if something is a novel or is something a short story. How do you know? You know by the way you feel about it. For me it’s the same thing with a young adult book or a children’s book—it’s a totally gut feeling. I don’t think I write for children or young adults differently, but sometimes approach difficult topics in a different way. In some ways I think I write at a much deeper level when I write for teenagers; I’m writing for the teenager that I was. Teenagers are so open and accepting of new ideas and they are so feeling. They’re not afraid to feel. So when I write about a much more difficult topic—I wrote a book called *Green Angel* after 9/11—I’m more open to writing for teenagers and writing about grief on that level.

I have a new book coming out, *The Foretelling*, which is about war, and I thought, “Why am I writing about this? This topic seems like the most important thing I’ve written about, why am I writing about it for teenagers?” They’re more ready to hear what I have to say. They haven’t shut down the way we do as adults, and so I’m more willing to go to the deepest places when I write for them.

Sexton: So what is *The Foretelling* about?

Hoffman: *The Foretelling* is about a girl during the Bronze Age whose mother is the Amazon queen. It’s about a tribe of women warriors—it’s really about a war culture and how they learn to look for peace.

Sexton: Were you looking for an allegorical model to use? How did it come about?

Hoffman: I think probably, but for me the process is always subconscious, so I’m not even sure how a book like *The Foretelling* came about. I had been thinking a lot about Amazons on a lot of different levels and had been wondering about how this world would be if women were in charge, especially in terms of the war that’s going on now. Later on, I realized I was also thinking about Amazons as being survivors—the whole myth about cutting off one breast. As a breast cancer survivor, I think the pull to that material was on a subconscious level that I didn’t realize at the time.

Sexton: What kinds of things were you reading as you were writing it?

Hoffman: Mostly I read a lot of archeology because I wanted to be as factual as I could be. The other reading was from Greek mythology. In the end, because the Amazons are a mystery, I felt that I could do whatever I wanted, which was nice.
Sexton: Do you remember the first story that you read?

Hoffman: I didn’t until you asked that. The first story I remember being able to read myself, which seems to me the first story I read, was a book called My Puppy, and I can see it; I can completely see it.

Sexton: Was it a Golden Book?

Hoffman: Yes, it was. I loved that book. I loved the fact that I could read the words on the page. It was such a mystery to decipher the mark on the page and that gave me such power, which I think it always does for people. That was my experience with the book, reading it without anybody else. You know I can see that puppy. I still like books about dogs.

Sexton: I know that the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer is very important to you. He once lamented that storytelling had become a forgotten art. Do you feel this way?

Hoffman: I think one of the reasons I like Singer is and why I’ve felt such an attachment to his stories was because they felt like stories that I knew. They felt like my grandmother’s stories—she came from Russia, and I grew up hearing her stories. When I started to read Singer, I felt this kind of familiar pull. His stories are so filled with, I don’t know if you can call it magic, but this folkloric feeling that I think I’m very drawn toward. When people talk about South American magical realists, whom I love One Hundred Years of Solitude, I feel they are part of a tradition in literature throughout the world, throughout time. For me, the way I learned about storytelling was through Singer’s really interesting use of the supernatural or magical possibilities in everyday life.

Sexton: The mystery . . .

Hoffman: Right, the mystery of life. I remember reading somewhere where someone asked Singer, “Do you believe in God?” And he said, “God, I’m not certain about, but the devil, I’m certain.” The best part of literature, for me, is that it can incorporate the miraculous into everyday life. For me, realism is always like the new kid on the block, and although I admire certain realists and like their work, realism seems like a smaller tradition within the larger tradition of storytelling. That’s how I see it.

Sexton: The story within the story, the tale within the tale—you do that all the time in your work and wonderfully. How does this come about for you?

Hoffman: I don’t do it on a conscious level. The stories that we tell ourselves—whether about religion, or morality, or love—are constructs we use to instruct ourselves. Words and stories can betray you or they can save you. Even before there is language there are stories. It’s the ladder we use to get ourselves through this earth up to hope and redemption.
Sexton: When you’re working on a novel or story, do you concern yourself much with narrative framing and how to incorporate these sort of fables and sub-narratives that arise within the major work?

Hoffman: It evolves organically. That’s what makes writing interesting for me. The way I work is that I truly don’t know what’s going to happen—it’s an act of explaining the world to myself.

Sexton: I once asked you about Isak Dinesen’s work, and you said that Elaine, your agent, noticed similarities in your work early on. Do you know her story “The Blank Page”?

Hoffman: I’m not familiar with that one.

Sexton: It’s an allegory of sorts. It takes place in the region where Carmelite novices grow and weave linen for the royal sheets. There’s a museum there where the nuns receive back the linens after the royal honeymoon, and then each one is framed and hung in the gallery. The one frame, which pilgrims stand before the longest, features a completely white square, the one without a stain.

Hoffman: That’s exactly what I was just talking about. Isn’t that interesting? To explain something you don’t understand or that makes you uncomfortable. You have to create a story, you can’t just accept it at face value. Yes, my agent, Elaine Markson, when I was first signing on with her, asked had I ever read Isak Dinesen, and I said no. After reading her, I thought about how someone had once said to me that you can’t construct new fairy tales. I don’t believe that. You can still construct new ones—even when using familiar, universal themes. I felt that’s what Dinesen was really doing, constructing new fairy tales, so I was really knocked out by her work. It was so different. I loved that her tone, that matter-of-fact tone, which is a fairy tale tone of complete acceptance of fabulous things.

The Blank Page sounds like a great story; I want to read that.

Sometimes you don’t realize the way things affect you. In my book Probable Future there is a museum of pain—everything that has hurt the characters is kept under glass to kind of explain their own agony to themselves, and also to elevate pain to the level of art. To give it meaning.

I do think that idea of what you were just talking about with Dinesen, about the weavers of the cloth, seems to me, analogous to the idea of spinning a tale. It’s always been the grandmother’s duty to tell stories, the way it is in fairy tales—to sit in the kitchen and while you’re sitting, while you’re weaving, you’re also knitting together a story. It’s women’s work, what can I say?

Sexton: There seems to be some kind of moral to the story, which is to be loyal to the story. It’s also a story within a story...
**Hoffman:** I'm not sure how I feel about that. I'm always afraid when people are too loyal to a story and have to see it the way they want to see it.

**Sexton:** You've written so much, it's hard to imagine that you've gone through writer's block. What have you done to emerge from those periods when you couldn't write?

**Hoffman:** I have had it. I had it when I had a terrible tragedy in my life. I had it when I was ill, and when I had a big breakup with someone I was working with. I have had it when I didn't believe in it. But I really think the only way to get past writer's block is to write your way out of it. If you wait for it to pass, you'll be waiting for twenty years. You have to sit down and decide you're going to write four pages a day or two pages a day, or one page a day, or whatever. And do it no matter what it is, just put it down, and maybe not read it, so that you're not hypercritical and not tempted to throw it out. Keep going and write your way back.

**Sexton:** Would you talk about how Victor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, may have helped you to formulate your attitude toward your writing life is?

**Hoffman:** I read him at a time when I was very ill and I had experienced great loss. I sat in the waiting room of radiation and I read two books: *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Man's Search for Meaning*—they seem like the opposite ends of the earth, but they both were so helpful.

I guess I had the feeling of why me? Why bother living? Why bother writing? Why bother doing anything—when you're going to lose everyone you've ever loved and it's going to disappear. Reading *Man's Search for Meaning* was a way for me to understand Frankl's experience with losing everyone he ever loved in the concentration camps and how that led to the formulation of his psychoanalytic theory of sorrow as being what makes us the people that we are. It's only through experiencing sorrow and loss that we become are realist, truest selves.

My experience with people as they've been dying has really backed that up. People become the essence of who they are in those moments and in that time. I think we tell each other stories so we don't have to deal with death and loss on that level, but sooner or later you have to deal with it completely and utterly with everyone you love. How do you do that? To tell you the truth, I now think that's what my work is about. Not necessarily for other people, but for myself. It's a constant attempt at figuring out the things that Frankl figured out—how do we do this? How do we live?

It's interesting because some people have said my work seems happy or all works out in the end, and I'm always amazed. I have so much death and so much sorrow in my books. I think that part of what I'm doing with my writing is trying to show myself that despite the death, despite the sorrow, there is still meaning. And people can take that however they want.

**Sexton:** And there are weddings and births along the way . . .
Hoffman: Exactly.

Sexton: Shakespeare did it, right?

Hoffman: True.

Sexton: Thinking about your new book . . . do you keep in the forefront of your mind what your moral purpose is in writing fiction or is it something more of a piece?

Hoffman: I always feel a novel is some pure essence of something you don’t even know yourself, that you stop yourself from knowing. Usually the writer is smarter than the person. I feel that I want to get to the writer part of me.

Sexton: The core?

Hoffman: The core, yeah.

Sexton: What do you think about the term “Hoffmanesque”?

Hoffman: I think it means I have a voice, one that’s recognizable. My mentor Albert Guerard always talked about an individual’s voice as a writer and how important that voice is. If you are really true to your voice, you are something-esque. You are the essence of yourself. If you take on another person’s voice, then you become kind of a shadow writer. There’s only one of everyone.

I can see that it’s freeing if someone studies and uses the techniques of other writers—O.K. Through Faulkner, I understood a writer could go into other people’s heads and I understood you could write from a different point of view that might not be your traditional point of view, and connect to the landscape, and be very emotional without using an intellectual scrim to hide that emotion. So that’s Faulkneresque. I learned something clearly, but I don’t think my work is Faulkneresque. You can learn something from the writers you love, and then translate it into your own voice. I think it’s the most important thing to have your own voice. It’s like music—the song’s important but really it’s the voice.

If my ‘sort’ of writing has done anything, I like to think that I opened the door and made it O.K. for literary women to have giants in their books, to have magic in their books, to go back to some kind of original kind of folktale experience. I have definitely seen that happen, and I think that’s good!

Sexton: Well, good for us. You’re often described as a supernatural writer but you also have this very real presence of science in your books. And sometimes they’re at odds, but you have detailed description of scientific fact and phenomenon. How do you go about learning the science and inserting it so authentically?
Well, I do the research and then I try to forget the research and just try to incorporate it into the story. *The Ice Queen* is very much about how science and magic are similar and how they relate to each other and overlap each other. When you’re sick you suddenly realize the doctors you thought knew everything, you realize that they’re experimenting and that there are these potions that may work, and may not. So science and magic really do overlap and maybe even these magical things like acupuncture seem more effective than science.

In *The Ice Queen*, they definitely overlap. The novel is about lightning and the experience of lightning affects everyone so differently—kind of like childbirth. Everyone’s experience is so different that it’s so difficult to explain in any scientific or medical terms. That’s what was interesting for me.

*Sexton*: Did you talk to people who had actually gone through a lightning strike?

*Hoffman*: I didn’t talk to people beforehand because I really wanted to invent stories. I have talked to people since who have come to readings who have felt that I did explain their experience correctly—they were comfortable with the way that I wrote about it. That was nice. But on a deeper level, I think I was writing about being a survivor, using the lightning strike to investigate the way you feel when some kind of tragedy befalls you. You feel like you’ve been hit by lightning; it’s out of the blue when somebody calls you one the phone and tells you about an accident or gives you a diagnosis.

*Sexton*: And then the transformation that occurs after.

*Hoffman*: Yes.

*Sexton*: No matter what genre you’re writing in, your prose is always so luminously well-crafted—your lines scan like poetry. I am wondering did you study poetry?

*Hoffman*: I didn’t study poetry, but I started out by writing poetry as a child. I think that free-form poetry is very attractive to beginning writers as a way to get your feelings out. Two of my closest friends are poets, so I think I have a feeling for poets, although I always feel that I am not a good reader of poetry. The whole sense of rhythm and attention to language that poets use is always amazing to me that people can spend so long with one line—the kind of perfectionism of poetry. The need for rhythm; it’s almost like song. I’m less interested in the format. I don’t really understand that. That seems like a mathematical game almost. But the attention to language, I’m really impressed by that.

*Sexton*: Do you ever read your lines aloud?

*Hoffman*: I do. I find that if you read your work aloud you can hear what doesn’t work, what’s too heavy—what’s repetitive, so I do at some point try to do that.

*Sexton*: Would you read an entire novel aloud?
Hoffman: No, sections. Sometimes I feel that I want the prose to feel like an incantation or a song, to stay with that rhythm throughout the whole book. For me it's all really done on a subconscious level. I find the more I think the more tangled up I am. I am kind of a perfectionist—I have to stop myself from doing that, for me, personally, because then I become too critical.

Sexton: You've had a long career, besides writing fiction, writing for film with your husband, Tom, and I wanted to ask you what it's like working with a partner after working alone as a novelist.

Hoffman: Well, I wouldn't want to work with a partner all of the time, but I do like working with someone else. It's good for me to do both because I am so inside of my head with a novel that working with someone else, even if it doesn't work out, even if the movie doesn't get made, it's another way of creating, one that's not so self-involved.

Sexton: What do you think of the advent of the blog? Are blogs going to change the future of writing and publishing?

Blogs are interesting, and I think Rosie O'Donnell has a fantastic blog. I love the idea of being able to be connected with people as you're working. It seems to me pretty much what Dickens was doing—having a book come out one chapter at a time. I think it's another way of reaching people who want to be involved with storytelling, even though I think that blogs won't take the place of books and you're not going to be going to bed with a blog the way you go to bed with a book, it's so intimate. I think it's a really interesting idea.

So for the future of writing, when I look at new writers, and I see the kind of purity and the reasons they want to write that have nothing to do with publishing—I feel good about the future. No two people can tell the same story, and there are always more stories to tell.