



# A Fistful of Sky

*Nina Kiriki Hoffman*

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The LaZelle family of southern California has a secret: they can do magic. Real magic. As a teenager, a LaZelle undergoes "the Transition"--a severe illness that will either kill him or leave him with magical powers. If he's lucky, he gains a talent like shape-changing or wish-granting. If he's unlucky, he never experiences Transition. If he's especially unlucky, he undergoes Transition late, which increases his chances of dying. And if he survives, he will bear the burden of a dark, dangerous magic: the ability to cast only curses. And curse he must, for when a LaZelle doesn't use his magic, it kills him. In Nina Kiriki Hoffman's *A Fistful of Sky*, Gypsum LaZelle is unique among her brothers and sisters: she has not undergone Transition. She resigns herself to a mundane, magic-bereft existence as a college student. Then one weekend, when her family leaves her home alone, she becomes gravely ill... --Cynthia Ward

## A Fistful of Sky Details

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## From Reader Review A Fistful of Sky for online ebook

### Nicole says

I just re-read this book and I was again struck by Hoffman's description and character building. I love all of her books, but this one is one of my favorites.

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### Amber says

After a three month dry spell, I finally blew through this great modern day fantasy. Both funny and complicated, it was a wonderful tale of a family coming into “transitions” and understanding and controlling their given talents.

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### Kelcey says

My first book of the year is part of my attempt to clear my shelves or at least try to remember why I kept certain books from long ago. I am pretty sure I read this in high school but I couldn't remember much about it or why I had liked it enough to keep it. It turned out to be a fun quick and rather interesting read. At almost 15 years old, this book is not new by any sense but it does still break a lot of general stereotypes and doesn't fit easily into many predefined genres/subjects. For one thing, this seems to fall squarely between young adult and new adult and this was long before new adult had even started to be defined as its own genre. The protagonist is definitely out of high school but hasn't committed to her next step and is still living at home, working and deciding what to do next. She also becomes the “chosen one” in a sense but with a twist. She is chosen to receive dark powers instead of the generally positive wish power the rest of her siblings received. While it is pointed out that she was probably the only one who could have successfully handled these powers, that doesn't take away from her “chosen one” type status. What I really liked about this book was how real it all felt. Gyp struggles with: family issues, sibling squabbles, her weight multiple times, and the repercussions of all kinds of “transitions”, things that almost anyone and especially women can relate to. The story itself was fun and never took itself too seriously and Gyp struggles through her own powers, making mistakes and doing her best. (view spoiler) So why the four stars? The ending felt rushed and cut off. (view spoiler) Overall, very enjoyable and easy to recommend!

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### Debbie says

After putting this down, I was really conflicted over whether I really liked the book or not. On the one hand, as I was reading it, I got swept up in the story, had trouble putting it down, and really wanted to keep reading. But, once I finished the book, I was left unsatisfied and a bit disappointed. It took a shower to help me realize just what made me so unwilling to like the book. (God bless showers. I get some of my best thinking done while standing under a steady stream of hot water.)

There were a number of things that were flawed:

The characterizations were very weak and vague. While the family antics amused me (Oh boy, talk about dysfunctional!), none of the characters, not even the narrator was fleshed out enough for me to feel an emotional attachment. Of the siblings, if Hoffman hadn't used their names I probably wouldn't have been able to tell them apart. Nor did we fully get to meet anyone outside the family. Claire and July were supposedly large and important parts of Gyp's life, but they were barely there and personality-less. We didn't even learn much about Ian other than he was a nice guy.

The rushed ending. Gyp figured out how to control her magic, and book ended. The end. What? Wait. It's only been a week, if that! Really needed more for me to feel real resolution.

Magic was too casually acceptance by those outside the family. After Gyp outs herself with Ian, and later with Claire, neither of them freaked out, asked a billion questions, or did anything but accept that she can curse things. Completely unrealistic, even with both's experiences with the occult, given that neither of them were particularly gifted themselves or had knowingly seen real magic before.

But what really bothered me throughout the book and made me not like it was the implication that if you had power, you could do whatever you wanted to anyone who had less power or no power -- with little or no consequence. The old adage that power corrupts is shown throughout the book. The LaZelles manipulated those around them, their surroundings, and even themselves however they saw fit, and did not question their right. As the normal sibling, Gyp was subjected to magical manipulation of her thoughts, feelings, wants, desires, actions, and even her own shape -- all without a second thought by the rest of her family. It was considered their right to spell her... because they could. Why else would her (horrible, horrible) mother never step in to police her children's use of power? Or try and protect Gyp from being made into a guinea pig? And her mother was the worst of the lot, creating compulsions for her children to never leave home, spelling her daughter so she would exercise and diet relentlessly, structuring their life to fit her idea of how it should be. She was abusive without ever having to lift a hand towards her children.

And when Gyp comes into her own power, she proves herself above this unthinkingly cruel way of being. She doesn't want to hurt people and tries desperately to try and harness her power benignly. So what does being this goodhearted persona get her? The role of walking doormat. She accommodates everyone automatically. She was so nice and sweet, she put up with everyone spelling her, manipulating her, and using her. And she STILL cheerfully cooks dinner half the week and spends an entire day making them cookies. But I have to wonder how much of that is her true personality and how much of that is having lived for two decades under the subtle control of her more powerful family members? She hated not being herself when she's cursed with Ultimate Fashion Sense - yet does she even know who she really is? She never stood up for herself; she let herself be talked into working on a day she had called in sick, she lets herself be pulled along by Altria, though she tries and controls the outcomes. THAT was the reason why I didn't connect with Gyp - I could never see myself acting so passively.

Though all the descriptions of food made me really want to make cookies and brownies.

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## **Kirsten says**

I LOVE Hoffman! Gypsum LaZelle is a magicless daughter in a very powerful magical family. She believes she will never Transition -- that is, gain her powers -- until one weekend when the rest of her family is away, she falls ill... and awakens with the very powerful ability to curse other people and objects.

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## Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

I enjoyed this, a cozy fantasy novel set in modern California. It reminded me a bit of Elfland, with its real-world though non-urban\* setting and its focus on a close-knit and eccentric family with hidden magical powers – though *A Fistful of Sky* lacks the romance and melodrama of Elfland, as well as Elfland's ethereal qualities. There's lots of magic in this book, but it's grounded in mundane reality.

Gypsum LaZelle is 20, but she still lives in her parents' mansion, along with three of her four siblings. She's accustomed herself to being the only "normal" member of her family, when she suddenly discovers a powerful and potentially sinister magical talent. Most of the book is about Gyp's struggles to understand her new powers, her changing family relationships and her search for her own identity. Coming-of-age stories are common in fantasy, but this one is handled well, in particular the positive message about body image. Gyp is chubby, and perfectly comfortable with that, a state of affairs even her image-conscious mother is forced to accept. (Too bad the cover artists couldn't accept it too; that's a beautiful design, but the slender silhouette does not fit this character.)

This is a quick read, often humorous, with lots of dialogue. Gyp has a good first-person voice and is endearing, though it's hard to tell what we're meant to make of her family; she loves them very much and yet they have a nasty tendency to use coercive magic against each other, and her, at every opportunity. In many ways the book reads as if it were Gyp's diary, sometimes bogging down a bit in the record of her every spell and the mechanics of her magic, sometimes with an eye to insignificant details such as seating arrangements. And the phrasing often sounds more like the way a young person would speak than polished prose. But it managed to pull me into Gyp's life, and the uses to which she puts her magic are funny and entertaining. She and her siblings are liable to run amok experimenting with their powers, and no one gets too worked up about the results, which sort themselves out one way or another; for a fantasy novel, this is remarkably chill.

So, I would recommend this book, when you're in the mood for fantasy without dire happenings or much in the way of plot, just growing up and having fun with magic. The fantasy genre can be dark and violent, so this is a nice change of pace. The story is set around Christmastime and would make an enjoyable Christmas read.

\* I'm classifying this as "urban fantasy" anyway, because I'm not sure how else to label a fantasy novel with a modern, real-world setting.

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## Michelle says

I've spent a good deal of time trying to come to terms with the feelings I have for this book. On the one hand, I find the characterizations intriguing and off-putting by turns and the entire idea of the story to be very, very interesting. But that's all I enjoy from this book. The idea and the concept.

*A Fistful of Sky* is about a young woman long resigned to her fate as the "normal" child of a magical family (aside from her normal father), but this is all turned upside down after her twentieth birthday, where after one harrowing weekend, Gypsum "Gyp" LaZelle undergoes the "Transition" and finally comes in to her powers.

Annnnd that's it. Honestly. Where the story could have become a beautiful coming-of-age, alternative lifestyle, accepting your family however they are and what they choose to be story, instead it makes a good show of family dynamics and putters out by about halfway through. The story in its entirety accomplishes nothing other than to introduce the concept of the LaZelle universe.

Do Gypsum and her family have to realize that family is more important than magical abilities and manipulating each other to get their way? Do they discuss and resolve the numerous and overwhelming sibling rivalry and familial issues that make up the core of this family dynamic? Do they ever have to deal with the fact that each of them did serious and unacceptable actions to each other and apologize for them? The answer is a resounding "ehhh not really, no".

Gypsum tells the author how badly she was treated by her family, but she never really reveals her feelings to her family. She never actually tells them how hurt by their actions she was, no matter how appalling they were. She gives little tidbits to them, but they never actually go anywhere and none of the siblings or her mother ever really apologize for what they've done in the past, which I find to be a grave failing on the author's part. What's the point of introducing all of those memories and scenes if not to discuss and alleviate those issues? Why add them in? For added mental distress to the reader?

And don't get me started on the actually plot arc. Hint: there isn't a cohesive, definitive one. Sure, Gypsum learns to accept herself and her power, but that's only after Altria, the mischievous spirit she summoned by accident, shows her how to lock away her power--easily and anticlimactically. This might as well have been done in the beginning for all the effort it did to get to that point in the book. There's little to no rising action--sure Gyp has to deal with the constant pressure of magic-build up unless she releases it, but she always finds a way to do so and the suspense just isn't there. It's like watching someone learn how to juggle; just because they drop the ball, there's no real damage to anything.

Ultimately, I'm disappointed in A Fistful of Sky. I feel jipped, really. There's nothing here for me that I can definitively say I liked in the book. The characters? No, each other them had more qualities I disliked than liked and some were just completely one-dimensional with no actual development. The execution? No, it had no definitive qualities to a story--like actual conflict, rising action and resolution. You cannot look me in the eye and tell me that any of the characters experienced consequences for their actions and learned any sort of definitive lesson. They simply never acknowledged their faults. There's just no---no real effort put in here by the characters and the story lacks so much of what it could be as a result. Everything is simple, easily resolved or pushed aside and because of that, I feel my time was wasted. I wanted a story about family and acceptance. I got a shoddy diary entry by what felt like a twenty-something girl who hadn't yet grown up. And what I got just doesn't work for me.

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## Shannon says

Throughout this entire book, I felt compelled to keep reading, continuously waiting for that big "thing" to happen. It never did. And yet I still enjoyed the read. The ending was a little flat. But it wasn't so bad that I regretted the time spent reading the book. A very interesting writer. I may have to read more by her just to see if all of her books are the same.

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## **Susan says**

I love just about everything I've read by Nina (and I've read all but her very earliest stories). This visit with the LaZelle family was really wanted. Having encountered the family a few times in short stories, the LaZelle clan is a nice change from the folks at Chapel Hollow and their extended clans.

I conned... er convinced my boss to read the book -- he didn't get the ending. I sent a copy to my sister in Texas and Mary, Shirley and Tyler all loved it-- in revenge for making fun of me for years, I've converted Mary to fantasy and paranormal romances! Shirley, I converted with Mercedes Lackey's Vanyel books and Mary tried to blame me for Tyler's love of fantasy -- but I'm in a whole other STATE! :-)

If anyone's interested I am also keeper of the !!official!! site for Nina's bibliography at <http://books.ofearna.us/hoffman.html>

Susan

RE-READ 10/14/2005

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## **Rachel Neumeier says**

I only discovered Hoffman this year -- this book was the first of hers that I read. It was so good I immediately bought everything else by Hoffman I could find! One of Hoffman's strengths is her writing, which is often beautiful.

I have to say, Hoffman is uneven. I found some of her books mediocre, and at least one pushed all the wrong buttons for me and I barely finished it. But this one is wonderful!

Although the main character, Gypsum, is in her 20s, *A FISTFUL OF SKY* reads like a YA novel. It's definitely a coming of age story, very much about finding your place in your family and in the world. Gypsum is thought to be too old ever to grow into her magical birthright, but (of course) she suddenly finds that her magical gift is awakening after all. Unfortunately, hers is a gift for cursing, so whatever she tries to do tends, no matter how good her intentions, to come out in disquieting ways. The cookie curse is hilarious!

This book is quite suitable for rather young readers and very enjoyable for adults. If you've found Hoffman not quite your thing with other books, you might give this one a try.

Other Hoffman books I loved: *The Silent Strength of Stones*; *The Thread That Binds The Bones*; *Spirits That Walk In Shadow*. Others that I enjoyed: *A Stir of Bones*, *Red Heart of Memory*, *Past the Size of Dreaming* (this set is a trilogy; the first doesn't really resolve the problem, the second has (for me) a major plot problem, and the third had quite a few loose ends that just dissolved into nothing plus an ending that didn't work for me. One that I really disliked all the way through: *Catalyst*.

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## Seth says

Bottom Line: An extremely passable novel by an overlooked author who has written many more accomplished works.

A family of Witches lives in modern suburban California although it is never explained how they got there or manage to keep their background secret. After years of being the black sheep of the family, Gypsum finally gains powers of her own, and must come to grips with how to control them. She is contacted by an ancient demon who takes a keen interest in her. When Gypsum naively grows to trusts the creature it predictably causes more harm then good. This leads to an incredibly predictable string of events where Gypsum inexplicably decides to trust the demon again... and again and again. Of course in doing so she gets double-crossed again and again and again. The cycle soon becomes redundant and is punctuated by some equally silly subplots including Gypsum willingly revealing her centuries old family secret to half a dozen of her friends on a whim, all of whom are incredibly cool with discovery that their friend is a witch who curses innocent people in her spare time (her family of course, are equally non-perturbed by having their secret revealed even though none of the them have disclosed it to anyone in untold centuries). This is all capped by what is perhaps one of the most bizarre and senseless endings I've ever read. One which comes out of left field and go more for shock value, at least at the time it was written, rather than a coherent, sensible ending to the book's events.

However, these narrative shortcoming might forgivable if the story was at least populated by interesting or believable characters. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In a novel filled with cardboard characters (the wise old uncle, the wicked stepmother figure) Gypsum is the worst, she's not charming or interesting enough to win the reader's affection and alternates between mopey self-pity and even mopier self-loathing. The internal logic governing the characters' abilities (which are more like the individually styled powers of a superhero team than traditional magic) is incredibly murky and full of coincidences, contradictions, and gobs of "Gee I wonder what would happen if I did this" moments. When all is said and done, "A Fistful of Sky" is an extremely passable novel by an overlooked author who has written much more accomplished works.

If you enjoyed this book I would recommend: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, A Spell for Chameleon, The Spook's Apprentice, Seventh Son.

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## Margaret says

Gypsum LaZelle was born into a family of magic users living in Southern California; her brothers and sisters came into their powers during what the family calls a "transition" in their teens, but Gyp is in her twenties, hasn't transitioned yet, and thinks she never will. When she comes down with a mysterious illness, though, she comes into her magic...but it's not what she or her family expected. Hoffman examines issues of identity, family, and the responsibilities of power, with a sympathetic portrait of an unusual family group, an intelligent, resourceful heroine, and an intriguing magical system, with great powers offset by sometimes great costs.

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## **Cheryl says**

Literary, lovely, and entertaining, too. I'll have to look into the sequel and others by the author, though it's not normally, on the face of it, the kind of thing I like. Meanwhile, it's a good thing I'm heading out and don't have time to bake right now.

I do like how we may not always sympathize with, or agree with, Gypsum's choices, but Hoffman makes us believe that they're the right ones at the current time for the character.

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## **Jackie "the Librarian" says**

Set in contemporary California, Gypsum comes into the magical heritage of her family very late, and it comes with a real wallup. She must use the magic, or it will kill her, but it's "curse" magic, so she must find a way to channel it safely.

Gypsy is a very appealing heroine, and her solution to her situation is unusual. Anyone who's struggled with becoming themselves will relate to Gypsy.

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## **Madeline says**

If her other books are anything like this one, I think I may have found a new favorite author. This deals with the coming of age of late bloomer Gypsum, then add in that hers is a family of mages and the complications double. A really lovely story about finding and accepting yourself without having to change who you are.

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