

Practical Magic Travels Through the Realm of Outsiders



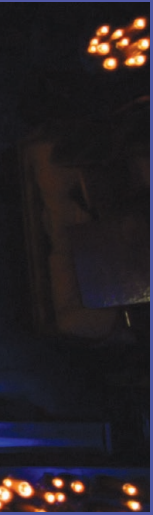
by Shannon Weber

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Alice Hoffman's 1995 novel *Practical Magic* was adapted into a heartfelt film that—along with other pieces of '90s pop culture such as *The Craft*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Charmed*, and *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation*—kicked the renaissance of empowered, female-driven witchcraft into high gear. And America has been enchanted ever since, with interest in witchcraft continuing to surge in recent years.

Gillian Owens (Nicole Kidman) and Sally Owens (Sandra Bullock) are two very different sisters from a long maternal line of witches living off the Massachusetts coast. *Practical Magic* explores the power of family bonds and the magical ingenuity of girls and women. Throughout the film, these themes are threaded by a connection to travel: traveling across lifespans to experience both joy and heartache; traveling across generations to channel ancestors and heal centuries-old wounds; and traveling between the social realms of outcast and center of the community.

Practical Magic begins in the past, revealing the persecution of Maria Owens (Caprice Benedetti), the first woman in the Owens family line to make her home in the then-Puritan Massachusetts coastal community. The townspeople attempt to hang Maria “because she had the gift...of magic.” Maria triumphs over death—using magic to escape her execution—and she awaits the return of her lover as she searches the sea, her pregnant belly foreshadowing her descendants to come. When her lover fails to return for her, she casts a curse over all the men whom future Owens women might love, a heteronormative attempt at sparing her descendants from heartbreak. This sets the stage for a long line of tragedy befalling men in the family, so that women's thoughts, feelings, leadership, and bonds are centered throughout the story.

With Maria's curse, we're also given insight into the workings of intergenerational trauma. Maria's trauma from being ostracized in her community and losing her beloved is transferred from one generation of Owens women to the next, as each faces ruined relationships with men and harassment from uptight and hypocritical townsfolk. Despite their fear of witchcraft, the latter appear at the Owens's door



with frequency, desperate for a love spell or other magical intervention into their life crises. Witches, it is clear, have staying power, despite being maligned and hunted for centuries.

Men in this film tend to be coded in gradations of danger, ranging from the absent lover who inspires Maria's curse; to Sally's much-loved first husband Michael (Mark Feuerstein), who meets an untimely end at the hands of the curse; to Jimmy Angelov (Goran Visnjic), Gillian's abusive, alcoholic one-time boyfriend who can't take no for an answer and responds to women who challenge his authority with violence. Finding a tenable solution to getting Jimmy out of Gillian's life occupies a large portion of *Practical Magic*. It's important to note that after Jimmy's undead spirit possesses Gillian, it's not Gary Hallet (Aidan Quinn), the cop investigating Jimmy's murder, who saves the day. Rather, it's the Owens women's magic, crucially strengthened by the recruited power of the gossipy-turned-empathetic townswomen. In *Practical Magic*, women express desire and love for men, but those men are at the mercy of their power.

In one of the movie's final scenes, as Sally engages in a blood oath with Gillian and cries out, "My blood, your blood, our blood," Aunt Jet (Dianne Wiest) adds, "Maria's blood!" A powerful white light pulsates through the circle of women as Sally, embracing Gillian, has flashbacks of their life together, and as the ragtag coven joins hands, the flashback montage includes Maria's face, uniting the past with the present as the

power of women's love and community brings Gillian back from the brink and heals the trauma that created, and arose from, Maria's curse.

Yes, Sally ends up with Gary in a hetero-normative fairy-tale crescendo, but she also deepens her connection to her witchiness and finally embraces being less than "normal" after running from it her whole life. In turn, the town at last accepts the family, celebrating their public Halloween "coming out" when the Owens women and girls deck themselves out in black dresses and whimsical pointy hats and jump off the roof of their rambling Victorian house, floating down with umbrellas Mary Poppins-style and laughing, to the cheers and delight of those below. *Practical Magic* travels from 1998 to 2018 as a beloved cultural icon that withstands the test of time and reinvigorates interest in witchy feminist spirituality, reminding us that there is, as Aunt Jet says, "a little witch in all of us." At its core, the film reaffirms that women and girls harbor deep inner reserves of power, and that we're at our very strongest when we come together in solidarity, healing, and love. **b**

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