

# A Thread of Grace

by Mary Doria Russell

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## About the Book

Set in Italy during the dramatic finale of World War II, this new novel is the first in seven years by the bestselling author of **The Sparrow** and **Children of God**.

It is September 8, 1943, and fourteen-year-old Claudette Blum is learning Italian with a suitcase in her hand. She and her father are among the thousands of Jewish refugees scrambling over the Alps toward Italy, where they hope to be safe at last, now that the Italians have broken with Germany and made a separate peace with the Allies. The Blums will soon discover that Italy is anything but peaceful, as it becomes overnight an open battleground among the Nazis, the Allies, resistance fighters, Jews in hiding, and ordinary Italian civilians trying to survive.

Mary Doria Russell sets her first historical novel against this dramatic background, tracing the lives of a handful of fascinating characters. Through them, she tells the little-known but true story of the network of Italian citizens who saved the lives of forty-three thousand Jews during the war's final phase. The result of five years of meticulous research, **A Thread of Grace** is an ambitious, engrossing novel of ideas, history, and marvelous characters that will please Russell's many fans and earn her even more.

## Discussion Guide

1. Renzo and Schramm have both committed crimes against civilians during war, but the priest Don Osvaldo feels there is some essential difference between the two men's actions. Is the difference merely a matter of scale, or is there an ethical difference? Does your emotional response to each character color your opinion?
2. Renzo attempts to remain apolitical during the Nazi occupation. Was that a moral position or should he have fought the Nazis from the beginning? Is moderation or neutrality possible or even desirable during war?

3. We are accustomed to admiring the partisan resistance to German occupation during World War II. In today's world there are many places where armed resistance to occupying forces is called terrorism. What makes a resistance legitimate? Does the motive of the occupying force make any difference?
4. Claudette's children never understand her, and she dies a mystery to them. Have you been affected by the war experiences of a family member? Were you aware of how their experiences affected them?
5. Was Iacopo Soncini a bad husband or a good rabbi? How does having a family change the responsibilities of the clergy?
6. Imagine that you heard Schramm's confession at the beginning of the book. If you were Don Osvaldo, what would you have told Schramm? Are there unforgivable sins?
7. Was Schramm's remorse genuine at the end of the book? Why did he put his uniform back on when he was ordered to by the German officer at the hospital?
8. How would you feel about a moral universe where Schramm went to heaven and Renzo went to hell?
9. People who didn't live through World War II often believe they'd have hidden someone like Anne Frank or helped refugees from Nazi Germany the way the Italian peasants did. What would be an analogous risk today.

## Author Bio

Widely praised for her meticulous research, fine prose and compelling narrative drive, Mary Doria Russell is the *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author of *THE SPARROW*, *CHILDREN OF GOD*, *A THREAD OF GRACE*, *DREAMERS OF THE DAY*, *DOC*, *EPITAPH* and *THE WOMEN OF THE COPPER COUNTRY*. Dr. Russell holds a PhD in biological anthropology. She lives in Lyndhurst, Ohio.

## Critical Praise

"Mary Doria Russell's fans (and aren't we all?) will rejoice to see her new novel on the shelves. **A Thread of Grace** is as ambitious, beautiful, tense, and transforming as any of us could have hoped."

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