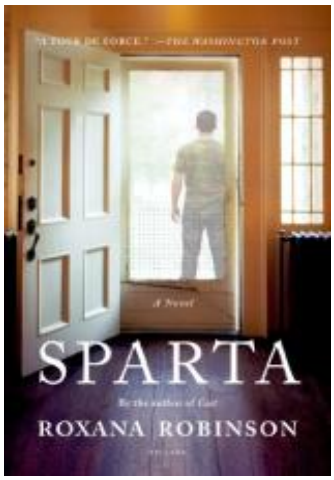
Sparta

by Roxana Robinson



About the Book

Giving voice to one of the most crucial issues of our time, the acclaimed novelist Roxana Robinson has created a portrait of the walking wounded among America?s veterans --- soldiers who have no physical scars but who cannot overcome the emotional traumas of Operation Iraqi Freedom and its otherworldly horrors. In SPARTA, Conrad Farrell?s family has no military heritage, but as a classics major at Williams College, Conrad is drawn to the Marine Corps ethic: ?Semper Fidelis? came straight from the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, where every citizen doubled as a full-time soldier. After college, Conrad joins the Marines and is deployed to Iraq at the height of U.S. attempts to democratize a nation overrun by brutal factions.

Returning home to New York?s Westchester County after four years of honorable service, Conrad appears to be in perfect shape: he hasn?t been shot, he was never wounded by an IED, and he sticks to a tough workout routine. As strong as he is, it?s soon apparent that the transition from war to peace may destroy him. As he attempts to reconnect with the people and places he once loved, he is haunted by psychological demons. The survival tactics that brought him home safely are now his worst enemy, winding his psyche into a taut knot of fear and guilt. Picturing dangers and destruction at every turn while questioning the value of his mission in Iraq, he tries to navigate a homeland that no longer feels like home to him. He longs for help --- from his family, his girlfriend, his fellow troops, the VA --- but each attempt to reach out ends disastrously.

Capturing the nuances of the unique estrangement that modern soldiers face as they attempt to rejoin the society they?ve fought for, SPARTA is a powerful testament to the moral consequences of war, for civilians and soldiers alike.

Discussion Guide

1. Explore the novel?s title. How does the description of Spartan life in chapter 4 compare to the life of a U.S. soldier in the twenty-first century? Why was Conrad drawn to classicism? Did he experience any of those ideals as a modern American warrior?

2. If you were in Claire?s position, how would you respond to Conrad?s homecoming? Ultimately, what does he need from her, and from all his loved ones? What makes it hard for him get his needs met without turning people away?

3. What are some of the differences between Marshall?s and Lydia?s approaches to their children? Despite her career as a successful therapist, why is Lydia mystified by Conrad?s symptoms, culminating in chapter 24, when she rejects his rage by telling him, ?I can?t stand this. Con, you have to do something about this??

4. How did Ali change Conrad?s perspective on privilege and political struggles? What common fears did they share?

5. As Conrad observes the dramatic changes in Go-Go?s value system, what does he discover about the way he and his friends have changed since graduation? Are we our true selves during our college years, or is that just an experimental phase? Do the demands of adulthood transform us into our true selves?

6. From chapter 5, where the factions of Fallujah are explained, what clarity did you gain? How did an American soldier?s duties in Iraq compare to those of armed forces in Vietnam and Korea?

7. While being with Jenny, what does Conrad discover about growing older and the changes that took place while he was away? As he walks familiar ground in Katonah and Manhattan, what has changed within him? What did his military service cost him?

8. What does Conrad?s heartrending experience with the VA and his session with Dr. Chandler reveal about the high suicide rates among U.S. soldiers and veterans? What would it take to fully fund psychiatric care in the military and rank it alongside weapons and armor in importance?

9. As Conrad remembers Carleton, Olivera, Anderson, and others, what emotions does he experience beyond guilt? How does his network of survivors cope with the seemingly trivial, naive nature of civilian life?

10. Everyone in Conrad?s world seems to have a purpose tied to meaningful work. Despite his damaged psyche, Conrad tries to find a new mission, enrolling in an economics class and forcing himself through the GMAT. How did his perception of a meaningful life radically change when he enlisted?

11. What truths are finally spoken at the end of chapter 24? How does the Farrells? response to trauma compare to your family?s? Throughout the novel, Conrad told himself that he must keep certain truths from his family. Was he right?

12. What makes Conrad?s relationship with Ollie special? What is Ollie able to see and do that the other family members?and the VA clinician?can?t?

13. In what ways can fiction sometimes capture reality better than a history book? How did Conrad?s story affect your understanding of the challenges faced by veterans and the aftermath of modern warfare?

14. What themes of healing are woven throughout this and other fiction you?ve read by Roxana Robinson? What is both unique and universal about Conrad?s experience?

Author Bio

Roxana Robinson is the author of 11 books --- seven novels, three collections of short stories and the biography of Georgia O?Keeffe. Four of these were chosen as *New York Times Notable Books*, two as *New York Times* Editors? Choices.

Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper?s*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The Southampton Review*, *Ep!phany* and elsewhere. Her work has been widely anthologized and broadcast on NPR. Her books have been published in England, France, Germany, Holland and Spain.

Roxana Robinson has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation and the MacDowell Colony, and she was named a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library. Robinson has served on the Boards of PEN and the Authors Guild, and was the president of the Authors Guild. She has received the Barnes and Noble ?Writers for Writers Award,? given by Poets and Writers, and the Award for Distinguished Service to the Literary Community from the Authors Guild. She teaches in the MFA Program at Hunter College.

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Publication Date: June 3, 2014
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 1250050170
ISBN-13: 9781250050175