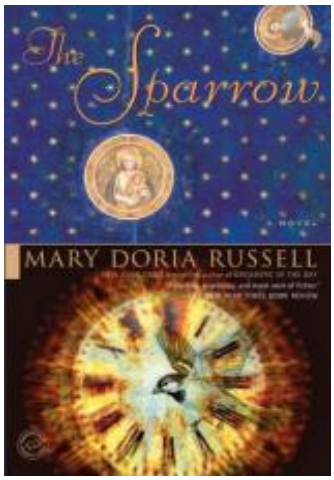
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The Sparrow

by Mary Doria Russell



About the Book

The Sparrow, an astonishing literary debut, takes you on a journey to a distant planet and to the center of the human soul. It is the story of a charismatic Jesuit priest and linguist, Emilio Sandoz, who leads a twenty-first-century scientific mission to a newly discovered extraterrestrial culture. Sandoz and his companions are prepared to endure isolation, hardship and death, but nothing can prepare them for the civilization they encounter, or for the tragic misunderstanding that brings the mission to a catastrophic end. Once considered a living saint, Sandoz returns alone to Earth physically and spiritually maimed, the mission's sole survivor--only to be accused of heinous crimes and blamed for the mission's failure.

In clean, effortless prose and with captivating flashes of wit, Russell creates memorable characters who navigate a world of exciting ideas and disturbing moral issues without ever losing their humanity or humor. Both heartbreaking and triumphant, and rich in literary pleasures great and small,**The Sparrow** is a powerful and haunting book. It is a magical novel, as literate as **The Name of the Rose**, as farsighted as **The Handmaid's Tale**and as readable as **The Thorn Birds**.

Discussion Guide

1.How do faith, love, and the role of God in the world drive the plot of this story? One reviewer characterized this book as "a parable about faith--the search for God, in others as well as Out There." Do you agree? If so, why?

2. This story takes place from the years 2019 to 2060. The United States is no longer the predominant world power, having lost two trade wars with Japan, which is now supreme in both space and on Earth. Poverty is rampant. Indentured servitude is once more a common practice, and "future brokers" mine ghettos for promising children to educate in return for a large chunk of their lifetime income. What kinds of changes do you think will occur by the twenty-first century--with governments, technology, society, and so on? Do you think America will lose its predominant status in the world?

3. Do you think it likely that we will make contact with extraterrestrials at some time in the future? What will the implications of such an event be? We've always viewed Earth, and human beings, as the center of the universe. Will that still be the case if we discover alien life forms? How will such a discovery change theology? Does God love us best? Will such a discovery confirm the existence of God or cause us to question his existence at all?

4. If, sometime within the next century, we hear radio signals from a solar system less than a dozen light years away from our own, do you think humankind would mount an expedition to visit that place? Who do you think might lead such an expedition? If you had to send a group of people to a newly discovered planet to contact a totally unknown species, whom would you choose? Is the trip to Rakhat a scientific mission or a religious one?

5. The Sparrow tells a story by interweaving two time periods--after the mission to Rakhat and before. Do you think this makes the story more interesting and easier to follow or more difficult to follow? How does this story differ from other stories you have read?

6. Why do you think Sandoz resists telling the story of what happened on Rakhat?

7. A basic premise of this story is an evaluation of the harm that results from the explorer's inability to assess a culture from the threshold of exploration. Do you see any parallels between the voyage of the eight explorers on the Rakhat mission and the voyages of other explorers from past history--Columbus, Magellan, Cortez, and others--who inaccurately assessed the cultures they discovered?

8. Despite currently popular revisionism, many historians view the early discoverers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries not as imperialists or colonists but as intellectual idealists burning to know what God's plan had hidden from them. Do you agree? Does this story make you reconsider the motives of those early explorers?

9. One of the mainstays of the Star Trek universe is the "prime directive" which mandates the avoidance of interference in alien cultures at all costs. Would the "prime directive" have changed the outcome of events on Rakhat?

10. In an interview, the author said, "I wanted readers to look philosophically at the idea that you can be seduced by the notion that God is leading you and that your actions have his approval." What do you think she means by that? In what way was Emilio Sandoz seduced by this notion?

11. The discoverers of Rakhat seem to be connected by circumstances too odd to be explained by anything but a manifestation of God's will. Do you think it was God's will that led to the discovery of and mission to Rakhat, as Sandoz initially believes? If that's the case, how could God let the terrible aftermath happen?

12. How is Emilio Sandoz's faith tested on Rakhat? One reviewer suggests that in his utter humiliation and in the annihilation of his spirit, Sandoz is reborn in faith. Do you agree? Consider Sandoz's dilemma on page 394. Did God lead the explorers to Rakhat--step by step--or was Sandoz responsible for what happened? If God was responsible for bringing the explorers to Rakhat, does that mean that God is vicious?

13. One reviewer wrote, "It is neither celibacy, faith, exotics goods, nor (as Sandoz bitterly asserts) the introduction of one of humanity's oldest inventions that leads to the crisis between humans and aliens. The humans get into trouble because they fail to understand how Rakhat society controls reproduction. In short, they fail because they fail to put

themselves into the aliens' shoes." Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?

14. Is confession good for the soul? Do you think Emilio Sandoz will ultimately recover--both as a man and as a priest--from his ordeal?

15. Why do you think it's so important to Emilio to stand by his vow of celibacy when he so obviously loves Sofia Mendez?

16. The Jesuits saw so many of their fellows martyred all over the world throughout history. Why aren't they more sympathetic in dealing with Sandoz--a man victimized by his faith?

17. What is this story about? Is it a story about coming face-to-face with a sentient race that is so alien as to be incomprehensible, or about putting up a mirror to our own inner selves?

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

"Powerful... Father Emilio Sandoz [is] the only survivor of a Jesuit mission to the planet Rakhat, 'a soul... looking for God.' We first meet him in Italy... sullen and bitter.... But he was not always this way, as we learn through flashbacks that tell the story of the ill-fated trip.... **The Sparrow** tackles a difficult subject with grace and intelligence. "

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