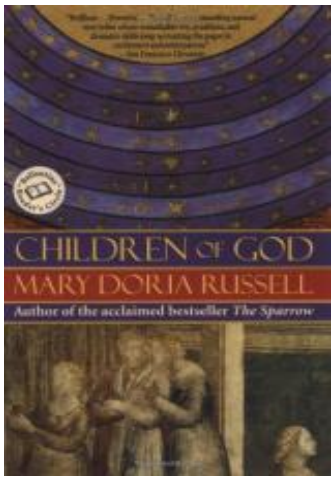
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Children of God

by Mary Doria Russell



About the Book

Mary Doria Russell's debut novel, **The Sparrow**, took us on a journey to a distant planet and into the center of the human soul. A critically acclaimed bestseller, **The Sparrow** was chosen as one of Entertainment Weekly's Ten Best Books of the Year, a finalist for the Book-of-the-Month Club's First Fiction Prize and the winner of the James M. Tiptree Memorial Award. Now, in **Children of God**, Russell further establishes herself as one of the most innovative, entertaining and philosophically provocative novelists writing today.

The only member of the original mission to the planet Rakhat to return to Earth, Father Emilio Sandoz has barely begun to recover from his ordeal when the So-ciety of Jesus calls upon him for help in preparing for another mission to Alpha Centauri. Despite his objections and fear, he cannot escape his past or the future.

Old friends, new discoveries and difficult questions await Emilio as he struggles for inner peace and understanding in a moral universe whose boundaries now extend beyond the solar system and whose future lies with children born in a faraway place.

Strikingly original, richly plotted, replete with memorable characters and filled with humanity and humor, **Children of God** is an unforgettable and uplifting novel that is a potent successor to **The Sparrow** and a startlingly imaginative adventure for newcomers to Mary Doria Russell's special literary magic.

Discussion Guide

1. How have the unforeseen mistakes of the first visitors to Rakhat influenced the history of the planet? Are there any parallels from our history? What does this story say about the gap between intention and effect? What do you see as the themes of this story?

2. Russell has constructed **Children of God** using a three-tiered story line: Earth and its standard time; the ship, Giordano Bruno, and its Earth-relative time; and time on Rakhat. The story also contained two parallel narratives: that of Mendes and that of Sandoz. Do you think this makes the story more interesting? Did you find it easy or difficult adjusting to the time jumps?

3. Russell never tells us what happened to the UN party that showed up at the end of **The Sparrow** and sent Emilio back to Earth. What do you think happened to them? Why does Russell leave the fate of the rescue party a mystery?

4. One reviewer describes the characters in this story as "rather too forgiving to be wholly human." Do you agree? If you were in Sandoz's shoes, would you be able to work with the people who kidnapped you?

5. At the end of the book Emilio Sandoz makes it very clear to Sofia that he can't forgive what was done to him. He is ashamed of that--he wishes he could, but he just can't let go of his hate. Do you think that will ever change for Sandoz? Sandoz also realizes that he can't hate the children of the men who harmed him, he can't hate the Jana'ata in general for what Supaari VaGayjur and Hlavan Kitheri and seventeen other men did to him. Is this a moral triumph for the former priest?

6. What price does Danny Iron Horse pay for agreeing to do what feels like a wrong for the right reason? Eventually Sandoz comes to understand the pressures Danny caved in to, but he never misses an opportunity to rake him over the coals for it. What sort of pressures was Danny subjected to? And how does Sandoz make him pay for his decision?

7. History and religious literature are both packed with examples indicated that God's favor brings not wealth and happiness, but agony and torture. How could Sandoz, a Jesuit priest inculcated with stories of martyred saints, feel so betrayed by God? Is there a difference between what happened to Sandoz and what happened to martyred saints throughout history?

8. Sofia has had all the same traumas as Emilio but unlike Emilio, she did not have sympathetic supporters to help her overcome what happened to her. How does she survive her experiences? How would you describe her reaction to the traumas she has suffered? Why does she become so blind to the suffering of the remaining Jana'ata?

9. In the Coda, Emilio muses that we come into the world hardwired to hear noise and make language, to see a chaos of color and find patterns, to experience random events and make a coherent life out of them. Is it possible that the idea of God is simply a manifestation of that biological drive to impose structure on sensory input?

10. How would you compare **Children of God** to the first Sandoz/Rakhat book, **The Sparrow**? Some reviewers consider **Children of God** a much darker story. Do you agree?

11. Even when he appears to be getting on with his life, Sandoz is caught in the larger machinations of a battle between Fate and Providence. Which do you think wins out in the end? Is there a clear winner? Does this novel provide the answers to Sandoz's questions about faith?

12. This story forces us to face the task of accepting the less theological and more ethical possibility that God may be merely an idea, yet one that still drives a people to live like children of God who place as much faith in a universal family as they do in the divine. Do you think God is merely an idea or does God really exist?

13. Beyond its determination to see Sandoz fulfill his destiny on Rakhat with or without his consent, why does the Church conspire to kidnap Sandoz and send him back to Rakhat? What purpose does this act serve? What would your reaction be if you were in Sandoz's shoes? Does the result--Sandoz's reconnection with God and his coming to terms with what happened to him on the planet--justify his kidnapping? In other words, do the ends justify the means?

14. There were extraordinarily important children born because Emilio was on Rakhat, including Isaac, Ha'anala and Rukuei. So, whether it's Providence or dumb luck, Emilio was the catalyst for everything that happened on Rakhat in the generations that followed the first Jesuit mission. Do you think Emilio realizes this? Does this make the suffering he lived through worthwhile?

15. What do you think of Danny Iron Horse's plan to save the Jana'ata by establishing reservations? Do you think Danny's plan will work in the long run or will it be as disastrous as America's reservation system was for Native Americans?

16. Sandoz faces a dilemma at the end of **The Sparrow**. If he accepts the spiritual beauty and the religious rapture he experienced as real and true, then all the rest of it--the violence, the deaths, the maiming, the assaults, the humiliations--all that was God's will, too. Either God is vicious--deliberately causing evil or at least allowing it to happen--or Sandoz has been deluded. What do you think of the way Russell handled this dilemma in **Children of God**? What is the place of evil and pain in a world ruled by a benevolent God?

17. Isaac composes a song based on the DNA for humans, Jana'ata, and Runa. He says it is God's music. What do you think he means by that?

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

"This is not a book about easy faith, or God as a nice guy. This is the God of Job, and his world is a moral thicket, a vale of tears, a place of terrors and wonders almost beyond human understanding."

Children of God

by Mary Doria Russell

Publication Date: February 2, 1999
Paperback: 438 pages
Publisher: Ballantine Books
ISBN-10: 044900483X
ISBN-13: 9780449004838