

Sarah's Key

by Tatiana De Rosnay

About the Book

Paris, July 1942: Sarah, a ten year-old girl, is brutally arrested with her family by the French police in the Vel' d'Hiv' roundup, but not before she locks her younger brother in a cupboard in the family's apartment, thinking that she will be back within a few hours. Paris, May 2002: On Vel' d'Hiv's 60th anniversary, journalist Julia Jarmond is asked to write an article about this black day in France's past. Through her contemporary investigation, she stumbles onto a trail of long-hidden family secrets that connect her to Sarah. Julia finds herself compelled to retrace the girl's ordeal, from that terrible term in the Vel d'Hiv', to the camps, and beyond. As she probes into Sarah's past, she begins to question her own place in France, and to reevaluate her marriage and her life. Tatiana de Rosnay offers us a brilliantly subtle, compelling portrait of France under occupation and reveals the taboos and silence that surround this painful episode.

Praise for the Book

"Masterly and compelling, it is not something that readers will quickly forget. Highly recommended."

—*Library Journal, Starred Review*

"A haunting, riveting novel... This book grabs your heart in the opening chapter, and its scenes and characters stay with you long after you finish."

—*Publishers Weekly, a PW 2008 Staff Pick*

"This is the shocking, profoundly moving and morally challenging story... It will haunt you, it will help to complete you... nothing short of miraculous."

—*Augusten Burroughs*

"A powerful novel... Tatiana de Rosnay has captured the insane world of the Holocaust and the efforts of the few good people who stood up against it in this work of fiction more effectively than has been done in many scholarly studies. It is a book that makes us sensitive to how much evil occurred and also to how much willingness to do good also existed in that world."

—*Rabbi Jack Riemer, South Florida Jewish Journal*

Courtesy of St. Martin's Griffin

About the Authors

Title: Tatiana de Rosnay

American Novelist (1961 -)

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Personal Information

Born September 28, 1961, in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France; daughter of Joël de Rosnay (a scientist and educator) and Stella Jebb; married; children: Louis, Charlotte. **Education:** University of East Anglia, B.A., 1984. **Addresses:** Home: Paris, France. **E-mail:** tatianacom@hotmail.com; tatianderosnay@noos.fr.

Career

Literary critic and author. Christie's (auction house), Paris, France, former press attaché; *Vanity Fair* (magazine), Paris, editor, until 1993; journalist for French edition of *Elle* magazine; literary critic for *Psychologies Magazine*.

Works

Writings

Novels

- *L'appartement témoin*, Fayard (Paris, France), 1992.
- *Mariés, pères de famille: romans d'adultères*, Plon (Paris, France), 1995.
- *Le dîner des ex*, Plon (Paris, France), 1996.
- *Le coeur d'une autre*, Plon (Paris, France), 1998.
- *Le voisin*, Plon (Paris, France), 2000.
- *La mémoire des murs*, Plon (Paris, France), 2003.
- *Spirales*, Plon (Paris, France), 2004.
- *Moka*, Plon (Paris, France), 2006.
- *Sarah's Key*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2007, French translation by Agnès Michaux published as *Elle s'appelait Sarah*, Heloïse d'Ormesson (Paris, France), 2007.

Author of the blogs *Elle s'appelait Sarah*, *Le Blog du Prix Lilas*, and *Fig Tree Français* by Tatiana. *Sarah's Key* has been translated into twenty languages.

Media Adaptations

Film rights to *Sarah's Key* were bought by Hugo Films and Experience Films.

Sidelights

Novelist Tatiana de Rosnay is the daughter of a French scientist and an English mother. Born in suburban Paris, she spent much of her early childhood in Boston, where her father was teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For her college education, she traveled to England, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of East Anglia. De Rosnay then returned to her native France, settling in Paris, where she worked for the auction house Christie's during the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, she was an editor for *Vanity Fair*, and then she joined the staff at *Elle* magazine. While also working as a literary critic for *Psychologies Magazine*, de Rosnay has established a successful career as a novelist on the side. Her contemporary fiction features ordinary people whose lives take unexpected, life-changing turns. De Rosnay's first eight novels remain untranslated and are in French, but she wrote her ninth, *Sarah's Key*, in her native English.

Several of de Rosnay's novels involve flawed male characters. *L'appartement témoin*, her first book, is about a self-involved and conceited man who believes he knows everything about life. That attitude quickly changes when a mysterious woman enters his life and he begins a life-altering trip across Europe and America to find her. *Mariés, pères de famille: romans d'adultères* is about how several women are affected by husbands who cheat on them. De Rosnay offers a novel with a twist in *Le coeur d'une autre*, which is about a misogynistic man who undergoes a remarkable transformation after he receives a heart transplant. The heart he is given is from a woman, and this fact causes him to reevaluate his life and change his perspective.

Not all the protagonists in de Rosnay's novels are flawed men, however. In *Spirales*, it is a woman who has an affair, with disastrous consequences. While making love, her paramour dies of a heart attack. Panicking, she flees only to become a murder suspect. Though somewhat less dramatic, *Le dîner des ex*, is about another flawed woman. Middle-aged Margaux decides one day to invite several of her former boyfriends to dinner, and the event stirs in her many regrets about the choices in her life. Other female characters in de Rosnay's fiction are simply the victims of unfortunate circumstances. In *La mémoire des murs*, for example, a woman becomes uneasy when she learns that she has moved into an apartment where a murder has occurred. *Le voisin* has a similar concept about a woman moving into a new apartment. In this case, however, she has a mysterious upstairs neighbor who harasses her relentlessly. In *Moka*, a meek woman

changes drastically after her son is run over in a car accident and subsequently falls into a coma; she consequently becomes determined to find the negligent hit-and-run driver.

Sarah's Key is something of a departure for de Rosnay. It is also the first time she writes directly in her mother tongue, English. Previously, she has set her books in modern times, but here she alternates chapters between the present and World War II France. Julia is a journalist who has been asked to write a story about what happened to the Jews in France during the German occupation. Coincidentally, she discovers that her apartment was once occupied by a Jewish family that was deported to Auschwitz. All the family members died, with the exception of the daughter, Sarah. Julia decides to research the story, and what she discovers transforms her own feelings about her life and her unfaithful husband. *A Publishers Weekly* critic declared that *Sarah's Key* "beautifully conveys Julia's conflicting loyalties, and makes Sarah's trials so riveting." "Masterly and compelling, it is not something that readers will quickly forget," concluded Lisa Rohrbaugh in a *Library Journal* review.

De Rosnay told *CA*: "I first started writing novels when I was eleven years old, in 1972. I was already a book worm and several books had inspired me: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, and *Young Visters* (sic) by nine-year-old Daisy Ashford. For my mother's upcoming birthday, I decided to write her a novel and she was most encouraging when she read "A Girl Called Carey," the eighty-page, hand-written story of a poor little rich girl in nineteenth-century London. So from then on, I wrote a book a year for my family. I was already then firmly convinced I was going to be a writer. But I did not seek publication till 1992.

"In my teens, I was influenced by Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Charles Baudelaire, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allan Poe, and Edith Wharton (although I knew I could never equal them!) Nowadays, I read many contemporary writers such as Ian McEwan and Tracy Chevalier, but I try not to be influenced and to let my own voice 'speak!'

"I take notes when I am preparing a novel and while I am writing it. I write early in the morning and late at night. My first readers are my husband, Nicolas, and my close friends Laure and Julia, who have more or less read everything I've written, even the unpublished stuff! It takes me a year or two to write a novel.

"The most surprising thing I have learned as a writer is that you can really reach out and touch people, in every sense of the word. And that they want to thank you for it. A wonderful discovery!"

When asked which of her books is her favorite, de Rosnay responded: "I'm attached to all nine of my novels and to my unpublished ones! But I'd say *Sarah's Key* is the book which has lit up something in my life, something that I'll never forget.

"I love it when my readers tell me 'they couldn't put my book down' and had to stay up all night to read it! I also love it when my readers recommend my books to their friends and family."

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Booklist*, January, 1997, review of *Le dîner des ex*, p. 827.
- *Library Journal*, May 15, 2007, Lisa Rohrbaugh, review of *Sarah's Key*, p. 78.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 28, 2007, review of *Sarah's Key*, p. 38.

Online

- *Tatiana de Rosnay MaPage*, [http:// mapage.noos.fr/tatianaderosnay](http://mapage.noos.fr/tatianaderosnay) (May 1, 2008).
- *Tatiana de Rosnay MySpace Page*, <http://www.myspace.com/yansor> (March 19, 2008).

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Author Interview

Q: What was the inspiration for *Sarah's Key*?

A: I have always been interested in places and houses. And how places and houses keep memories, how walls can talk. I was browsing on the Internet about places in Paris where dark deeds had happened, and fell upon a website describing the rue Nélaton, in the 15th arrondissement, not far from where I live. That was where the great Vél d'Hiv roundup took place on July 16th 1942.

Q: How much did you know about what happened before you started writing?

A: I realized I didn't know much about what exactly happened that day. I was not taught about this event at school, during the 70's. And it still seemed to be shrouded by some kind of taboo. So I started reading and researching.

Q: And what did you learn? How did it make you feel?

A: As I progressed through my research, I was moved, appalled by what I discovered concerning the Vél d'Hiv roundup, especially about what happened to those 4000 Jewish children, and I knew I had to write about it. I needed to write about it. But I also knew it could not be a historical novel, it had to have a more contemporary feel to it. And that's how I imagined Julia's story taking place today, linked to Sarah's, back in the 40's.

Q: Please share a few words about the writing process.

A: Writing *Sarah's Key* has been a powerful experience. First of all, reverting to my mother tongue after years of writing novels in French felt exhilarating. Like coming home after a long trip. Secondly, researching those dark times of France's past, the Occupation, the Vichy years, was tremendously enriching. But sobering, too.

Writing *Sarah's Key* took me to Drancy and Beaune La Rolande, places around Paris which have a dreaded past that cannot be forgotten despite time going by. My visits there were poignant and memorable. And it was also through this book that I met Heloïse d'Ormesson and Gilles Cohen-Solal, my French publishers, who hold world rights to the novel, and whose enthusiasm concerning *Sarah's Key* --- and me --- have added a whole lot of excitement to my career as a writer.

Q: Speaking of your writing career, who are some of your favorite authors?

A: I admire Daphne du Maurier, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Irène Nemirovsky, Emile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allen Poe. And Paul Auster, Joanna Trollope, Anita Shreeve, Penelope Lively, A.S Byatt, JM Coetzee, Maggie O'Farrell, Tracy Chevalier, Joyce Carol Oates, and Sarah Waters.

Courtesy St. Martin's Griffin

Discussion Questions

1. What did you know about France's role in World War II --- and the Vél d'Hiv round-up in particular --- before reading Sarah's Key? How did this book teach you about, or change your impression of, this important chapter in French history?
2. Sarah's Key is composed of two interweaving story lines: Sarah's, in the past, and Julia's quest in the present day. Discuss the structure and prose-style of each narrative. Did you enjoy the alternating stories and time-frames? What are the strengths or drawbacks of this format?
3. Per above: Which "voice" did you prefer: Sarah's or Julia's? Why? Is one more or less authentic than the other? If you could meet either of the two characters, which one would you choose?
4. How does the apartment on la rue de Saintonge unite the past and present action -- - and all the characters --- in Sarah's Key? In what ways is the apartment a character all its own in?
5. What are the major themes of Sarah's Key?
6. De Rosnay's novel is built around several "key" secrets which Julia will unearth. Discuss the element of mystery in these pages. What types of narrative devices did the author use to keep the keep the reader guessing?
7. Were you surprised by what you learned about Sarah's history? Take a moment to discuss your individual expectations in reading Sarah's Key. You may wish to ask the group for a show of hands. Who was satisfied by the end of the book? Who still wants to know --- or read --- more?
8. How do you imagine what happens after the end of the novel? What do you think Julia's life will be like now that she knows the truth about Sarah? What truths do you think she'll learn about her self?
9. Among modern Jews, there is a familiar mantra about the Holocaust; they are taught, from a very young age, that they must "remember and never forget" (as the inscription on the Rafle du Vél d'Hiv) Discuss the events of **Sarah's Key** in this context. Who are the characters doing the remembering? Who are the ones who choose to forget?
10. What does it take for a novelist to bring a "real" historical event to life? To what extent do you think de Rosnay took artistic liberties with this work?
11. Why do modern readers enjoy novels about the past? How and when can a powerful piece of fiction be a history lesson in itself ?

12. We are taught, as young readers, that every story has a “moral”. Is there a moral to Sarah’s Key? What can we learn about our world --- and our selves --- from Sarah’s story?

Courtesy of Reading Group Guides