

A Thread of Grace

by Mary Doria Russell

About the Book

It is September 8, 1843, and fourteen-year-old Claudette Blum and her father are among the thousands of Jewish refugees scrambling over the Alps toward Italy, where they hope to find safety now that the Italians have broken from Germany and made a separate peace with the Allies. The Blums will soon discover that Italy is anything but peaceful, as it quickly becomes an open battleground for the Nazis, the Allies, Resistance fighters, Jews in hiding, and ordinary Italian civilians trying to survive.

Tracing the lives of a handful of fascinating characters — a charismatic Italian Resistance leader, a priest, and Italian rabbi's family, a disillusioned German doctor — Mary Doria Russell tells the little-known story of the vast underground effort by Italian citizens who saved the lives of 43,000 Jews during the final phase of World War II. *A Thread of Grace* puts a human face on history.

Praise for the Book

“A powerfully imagined novel . . . [a] profoundly moving book that engages the heights and depths of human experience.”

— *Los Angeles Times*

“An addictive page-turner . . . Russell has an astonishing story to tell — full of action, paced like a rapid-fire thriller, in tense, vivid scenes that move with cinematic verve.”

— *The Washington Post Book World*

“Hauntingly beautiful, utterly unforgettable.”

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Rich . . . Based on the heroism of ordinary people, [*A Thread of Grace*] packs an emotional punch.”

— *People*

“[A] deeply felt and compellingly written book . . . The progress of each character's life is marked or measured by acts of grace. . . . Russell is a smart, passionate and imaginative writer.”

— *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

Courtesy of Ballantine Books

About the Author

Mary Doria Russell

American Novelist (1950–)

Also known as: Mary Doria Russell, Mary D. Russell

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Personal Information: Born August 19, 1950, in Elmhurst, IL; daughter of Richard P. (a law enforcement officer) and Louise (a registered nurse; maiden name, Dewing) Doria; married Donald J. Russell (a software engineer), September 5, 1970; children: Daniel Jacob.

Education: University of Illinois, B.A., 1972; Northeastern University, M.A., 1976; University of Michigan, Ph.D., 1983.

Politics: Democrat.

Religion: “Cradle Catholic, Jewish by choice.”

Memberships: Science Fiction Writers of America.

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Career: Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, prosector and special lecturer in Department of Oral Biology, School of Dentistry, 1983, clinical instructor, 1984–86, adjunct professor, Department of Anthropology, 1986. Forensic consultant for law enforcement agencies, 1979–85; delivered papers at professional meetings, 1979–86; engaged in field work and research expeditions, including one to Croatia and Australia, 1979–86; invited lecturer at various educational institutions, 1981–84; North Coast Technical Writing, South Euclid, OH, proprietor, 1986–92.

Awards: Recipient of various grants, awards, and fellowships, National Science Foundation and other institutions, 1980–86; Trotter Award (two) for scientific work on skeletal material, c. 1980s; Book of the Month Club First Fiction Award finalist, 1996, James Tiptree, Jr., Memorial Award, 1996, British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Novel, 1997, Arthur C. Clarke Prize for best novel, 1998, John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in Science Fiction, 1998, International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award nominee, 1998, Spectrum Classics Hall of Fame winner, 2001, and Kurd Lasswitz Preis (Germany), 2001, all for *The Sparrow*; Cleveland Council for the Arts Literature Prize, 1998, Hugo Award finalist, 1999, American Library Association Readers Choice Award, 1999, and Spectrum Classics Hall of Fame award, 2001, all for *Children of God*; Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters, LeMoyne College, Syracuse, NY, 2000; named a Woman of Influence, *Crain's Cleveland Business*, 2000; Pulitzer Prize nomination, 2005, for *A Thread of Grace*; Northern Ohio Live Award of Achievement, finalist, 2005; Asteroid 12374 194JG9 was named “Rakhat” in tribute to the planet in *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*.

WRITINGS

- *The Sparrow*, Villard (New York, NY), 1996.
- *Children of God*, Villard (New York, NY), 1998.
- *A Thread of Grace*, Random House (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Dreamers of the Day*, Random House (New York, NY), 2008.

Contributor to scientific journals and periodicals, including *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. Author of technical manuals, 1986–92. Author of the afterword of *This Has Happened: An Italian Family in Auschwitz* by Piera Sonnino, Palgrave, 2006.

Media Adaptations: *The Sparrow* has been optioned by Warner Brothers and is the subject of a rock opera by Metaphor.

Sidelights

On the surface, it seems almost self-evident that Mary Doria Russell, with her doctorate in paleoanthropology — the study of fossils left by the evolutionary ancestors of humankind — would have chosen to write science fiction. But she does not consider herself a science fiction writer, and her works deal with the origins of life in a metaphysical rather than a physical sense. Religious faith is a primary theme in Russell’s writing, regardless of the setting — whether on the planet Rakhat in her first two novels, *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*, or in wartime Italy in her third novel, *A Thread of Grace* — and Russell is straightforward about the religious transformation that was one of the defining experiences of her life.

Russell once referred to herself as a “cradle Catholic of Italian heritage who converted to Judaism as a middle-aged woman, after decades of atheism.” Growing up in the Midwest during the 1950s and 1960s, she attended Catholic school and married at age twenty. Nine years later, as a Ph.D. student in paleoanthropology, Russell decided she was an atheist, but when she began writing what would become her novel *The Sparrow* in the 1990s, she began to reconsider the subject of religion, and made a return to faith—through Judaism. “What I discovered as I wrote,” she once explained, “is that I always turn to Jewish thought in a crisis, fictional or real.”

Despite the author’s own choice of faith, Catholic Jesuit priest Emilio Sandoz is the hero of *The Sparrow*. The tale follows two threads, one beginning in 2016, when astronomers on Earth hear a haunting song that drifts across the universe — from “practically next door,” as it turns out, just four light-years away near the star Alpha Centauri. The Society of Jesus, a Catholic missionary order, sends an expedition led by Father Sandoz to find the people who created the song. When they reach the planet of Rakhat, they meet with a gentle race called the Runa, and at first it seems they have found an idyllic world. But then they discover that the Runa are not the only ones living on Rakhat; they are merely the domesticated animals of the Jana’ata. There follows a sequence of events that will leave Emilio broken by the time — forty-four years later, and in the other thread of narrative — he makes his weary way back to earth. In the intervening years, he has been

shattered physically, mentally, and spiritually, and has discovered that nothing — not even the song that drew him and the others to Rakhat in the first place — is what it seems to be.

There are a number of elements at work in *The Sparrow*, and the science-fiction “first contact” story is only one layer. Emilio is part Taino Indian, a descendant of some of the first people to come in contact with Christopher Columbus and other European explorers who began landing in the New World in 1492. Russell started writing *The Sparrow* around the time of the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s voyage, when the explorer was exposed to a scathing round of public criticism for his treatment of native peoples and the environment. In her story, as she said in an *Amazon.com* interview, which she reposted on her home page, she “drew on two examples from history. First contact between European explorers, missionaries and settlers was a catastrophe for the native peoples of the two American continents. But it was also the best damned thing that ever happened for millions of immigrants to America from all over the world.” The second example came from Romanov Russia and an exhibit of Faberge eggs featured at a local museum: “they were breathtakingly beautiful, but I could not look at them without trying to calculate the number of lives each one represented. . . . It was staggering, and reminded me once again that there was a reason for the Russian Revolution of 1917.”

After eighteen months and thirty-one rejections, the novel was sold to Villard at an auction. Russell linked up with Villard editor Jane Dystel, who chose to market *The Sparrow* as mainstream fiction. The novel was published in 1996 and became a popular book club selection. Booksellers and readers developed a sort of missionary zeal for the novel, Russell once wrote, and eventually she began to win over those most inclined to distrust her work as that of an outsider: science fiction fans.

Critic Andrew J. Krivak called *The Sparrow* “an intriguing venture into the journey of faith by way of science fiction, anthropology, and the Society of Jesus” in his *America* review. The novel, Krivak added, “is science fiction brought back to the project with which it began in the hands of writers like Jules Verne.” Tom De Haven of *Entertainment Weekly* added, “Russell’s first novel is finally a parable about faith — the search for God, in others as well as Out There.”

Children of God, Russell’s sequel to *The Sparrow*, more closely explores the world of Rakhat — particularly its spiritual dimensions. In this novel, Jesuit Father Sandoz, the lone survivor of the disastrous first mission, returns to Rakhat and faces public anger over his Order’s role in the war between the Runa and the Jana’ata. He also has his own self-hatred and religious disillusionment to deal with. The new expedition Sandoz is with is more interested in making money than spreading faith. When they arrive on Rakhat, they find the planet in turmoil and the Runa barely holding on to power and once again the Jesuits decide to interfere. “As in her first book,” noted a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, “Russell uses the entertaining plot to explore sociological, spiritual, religious, scientific, and historical questions. . . . It is, however, the complex figure of Father Sandoz around which a diverse interplanetary cast orbits, and it is the intelligent, emotional and very personal feud between Father Sandoz and his God that provides energy for both books.”

In *Library Journal*, Susan McCaffrey wrote that in *Children of God*, Russell “brings each unique character alive with a brilliant grasp of dialect and nuance in this finely crafted sequel to *The Sparrow*.” Ray Olson, on the other hand, noted in *Booklist* that “Russell offers plenty of plot, fascinating secondary characters, and the religious, cultural, and linguistic imagination that distinguished *The Sparrow*, but she lacks the literary skill to make first-rate fiction.” Jackie Cassada, reviewing the novel for the *Library Journal*, had a different reaction: “Powerful prose and memorable characters make this a prime purchase for all sf and speculative fiction collections.”

Children of God, commented Krivak in an *America* review, “does not provide the answers to our (or Sandoz’s) questions about faith. Rather we are faced with the even harder task of accepting the less theological but more ethical possibility that God may be merely an idea, yet one that still drives people to live like children of God who place as much faith in universal family as they do the divine.” The critic continued, “whether one likes science fiction or not,” the book “explores current social questions as well as traditional theological ones. In doing so, her fiction, like all good fiction, takes the story beyond entertaining and into the world where wise teachers dwell.”

Russell’s third novel, *A Thread of Grace*, tells the story of the Jewish underground in Genoa during the Nazi occupation of Italy in World War II. In spite of the fact that Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was an ally of Hitler, Jews had a higher survival rate in Italy than in any other occupied country. Given her Italian ancestry and her adopted faith of Judaism, the subject held a great interest for Russell. “I’m finding that even people who are very knowledgeable about World War II and the Holocaust know very little about Italy, and nothing about northwestern Italy, which was the scene of a conspiracy of peasants, priests and native Italian Jews to save thousands of refugees,” she said in her interview with *Amazon.com*. It was not until Russell read Alexander Stille’s *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families under Fascism* that she learned anything about the topic. She told Brian McLendon of Random House in an interview hosted on her home page, “My first reaction was, ‘Italian Jews? I thought I was the only one!’ There was a section called ‘The Priest, the Rabbi and the Aviator,’ which sounds like the set up for a joke, right? But it was all real, and riveting, and I thought, ‘This has got to be my next story.’”

“The action moves from group to group like a complex movie — history through the eyes of well-drawn characters,” wrote Edna Boardman in *Kliatt*. Russell “paints a sweeping saga,” according to Donna Marchetti of the Cleveland, Ohio *Plain Dealer*, noting that like Russell’s previous works, the novel raises “the probing moral questions for which Russell has become known.” Russell also focuses on creating fully drawn characters. According to Mary Ellen Quinn in *Booklist*, “Russell is good at presenting the human story while never using the war merely as a backdrop for personal dramas.” Henry L. Carrigan, Jr., on the other hand, wrote in his *Library Journal* review that the number of characters meant none of them could be fully developed, and thus appeared as “one-dimensional portraits.” A *Publishers Weekly* critic, however, concluded that “the action moves swiftly, with impressive authority, jostling dialogue, vibrant personalities and

meticulous, unexpected historical detail,” and a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called the book “beautiful, noble, fascinating, and almost unbearably sad.”

Dreamers of the Day, Russell’s fourth novel, is also a twentieth-century historical fiction. Set during the 1921 Cairo Peace Conference, it features real historical figures including T.E. Lawrence, Winston Churchill, and Lady Gertrude Bell, people who were instrumental in the reformation of the Middle East after World War II. Russell described it to *Bookslut*’s Paul Holler as an event “during which a handful of European dreamers and politicians and pencil pushers got together to flirt and eat and go out to the pyramids to get their picture taken on camelback, and oh, yeah — create the modern Middle East.” As she did when working on *A Thread of Grace*, Russell became interested in the history behind the event, as well as its continuing implications into modern politics. The novel is told in the style of a travelogue through the voice of Agnes Shanklin, an American visitor to Cairo. Russell “has created an instantly likable heroine whose unlikely adventures will keep readers hooked to the end,” according to a *Publishers Weekly* contributor.

When asked by Mclelendon of Random House why she chose to move from science fiction to historical fiction, Russell replied, “Actually while I was writing *The Sparrow*, I thought of it as a historical novel that takes place in the future. Whether you go forward sixty years or back in time sixty years, there was still a need to imagine a place and time that aren’t my own.” Among her literary influences, Russell cites Austrian philosopher of science Karl Popper and historical novelist Dorothy Dunnett. As for her method of writing, she once explained: “To use a football analogy, I make yardage every day. I don’t try to throw a long bomb to the end zone every time I turn on the computer, which is to say, I don’t wait to be inspired, or for the emotional conditions to be right, or for some big conceptual breakthrough, although that happens now and then. If I’m working on a novel, I work on it every single day. Even if all I manage to accomplish is to polish a paragraph or untangle a sentence, then the manuscript is improved and I got a little further down the field.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

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- *Booklist*, September 1, 1996, Jennifer Henderson, review of *The Sparrow*, p. 63; October 1, 1996, John Mort, review of *The Sparrow*, p. 304; January, 1997, p. 761; January 1, 1998, Ray Olson, review of *Children of God*, p. 774; December 15, 2004, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 709.
- *Bookwatch*, December, 1996, p. 7.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 1996, p. 15.
- *Commonweal*, February 28, 1997, p. 27.
- *Daily Variety*, March 3, 2006, Pamela McClintock, “Sparrow in Warners Nest,” p. 1.

- *Entertainment Weekly*, October 18, 1996, Tom De Haven, review of *The Sparrow*, p. 71; December 27, 1996, p. 140; February 4, 2005, Jennifer Reese, review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 140.
- *Hudson Review*, autumn, 2005, Thomas Filbin, "Fiction like Verona," pp. 513-518.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 1996, p. 1085; November 1, 2004, review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 1027.
- *Kliatt*, July, 2005, Edna Boardman, review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 58.
- *Library Journal*, February 15, 1998, Jackie Cassada, review of *Children of God*, p. 173; May 1, 1998, Susan McCaffrey, review of *Children of God*, p. 157; February 15, 2005, Henry L. Carrigan, Jr., review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 120.
- *MBR Bookwatch*, March, 2005, Harriet Klausner, review of *A Thread of Grace*.
- *New York Times Book Review*, December 15, 1996, p. 39.
- *People*, July 21, 1997, p. 30; February 21, 2005, Lee Aitken, review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 47.
- *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), December 10, 2005, "Local Writer Turns Her Attention from the Future to the Past," p. E2.
- *Publishers Weekly*, September 9, 1996, review of *The Sparrow*, p. 64; February 2, 1998, review of *Children of God*, p. 80; November 29, 2004, review of *A Thread of Grace*, p. 21; March 13, 2006, Michelle Kung, "Brad Pitt, Space-Traveling Priest?" p. 10; September 4, 2006, review of *This Has Happened*, p. 51; November 5, 2007, review of *Dreamers of the Day*, p. 40.
- *Science Fiction Review*, January, 1997, p. 48.
- *U.S. Catholic*, July, 1997, p. 6; May, 2005, Peter Gilmour, "Third Is Charming," p. 6.

ONLINE

- *Bookslut*, <http://www.bookslut.com/> (September, 2005), interview with Russell.
- *Literati Net Web site*, <http://literati.net/Russell/> (December 30, 2007), profile of Russell.
- *Mary Doria Russell Home Page*, <http://marydoriarussell.info/> (December 30, 2007).
- *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (December 30, 2007), profile of Russell.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: What inspired you to write *A Thread of Grace*?

Mary Doria Russell: Shortly after my conversion to Judaism, I came across Alexander Stille's book *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism*. The section called "The Priest, the Rabbi and the Aviator" was so dramatic, and so surprising, I set the book aside. I knew that I had to write about that era of Italian history somehow. When I mentioned this to a Polish Catholic friend, Maria Rybak, she told me a story about her aunt, who witnessed a Gestapo roundup of Jews during the war. "Never judge those of us who lived through those times," Maria's aunt told her. "I saw a Jewish woman standing in the back of a truck with a baby in her arms. A lady standing in the crowd near me said, 'Give me your child!' The woman in the crowd could have been beaten for offering to take that baby. The mother had to decide: give her baby away or take the child with her to God knows what. Until you can imagine *that*, you can't understand what it was like for us." So one of my goals with this novel was to recreate the immediacy of decisions like that. I wanted readers to buy in to decisions the characters made, and then "live" with the consequences as the story progressed. There was another moment that gave impetus to the writing of this story. One night I watched a PBS special about the 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy. A French woman was interviewed because her house was right in the middle of what became a battlefield. She and her kids hid in a cellar hour after hour, while mortars and machine gunfire exploded above them. When the noise finally stopped, she and the kids came upstairs into . . . nothing. The house had been blown to bits. Now, that woman understood the historic moment and the importance of that battle, and she was grateful she and her children had survived. But what stuck in my mind was her final lament: "I had just finished wallpapering the hallway." You can see how her remark came to be reflected in my novel.

Q: It took you seven years to write *A Thread of Grace*. Why?

MDR: Well, first of all, there was a ton of research to do about the era, the war, the issues, the characters, but there were a lot of factors that slowed things down — primarily the fact that I became a card-carrying member of the Sandwich Generation. Just as menopause was hitting me like a brick upside the head, my husband's dad was dying of congestive heart failure; Don's mother is now ninety, and lives in Illinois, despite my warmest desire that she be nearer. My own mom, who lived in New Hampshire, fought ovarian cancer for a grueling fifty-five months. Two days ago, we thought my father would be going in for open-heart surgery, but it turned out he didn't need it after all. The adrenaline is still draining out of my system, thirty hours later. Let's see . . . my son learned to drive and started to date while I was working on *A Thread of Grace*, and got his heart broken, and had a minor accident, and applied to colleges. He leaves the nest for a semester at a time, and got straight A's his freshman year, but comes back every few weeks to leave dirty dishes in the sink. Oh, and the collie died in my arms after running up spectacular vet bills, and then we got a golden retriever puppy; I was housebreaking

Leo while writing about April 1944. Then I got myself a three-year-old rescue dachshund from Petfinder.com while editing the manuscript, *just because I wanted her, dammit*. And she is adorable, but the upshot is, my life is just as full of distractions and responsibilities and self-inflicted complication as everybody else's. So that's why *A Thread of Grace* took seven years to finish. I gave up at least once a week, but I have an almost pathological drive for task completion, and e-mail from readers (some of whom have become dear friends) kept me going.

Q: Did you have a day job when you started writing? Has the success of the books changed your life much?

MDR: I was a PTA mom while writing my first two novels, *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*. We could afford to have me stay at home to raise Danny because my husband, Don, is a software engineer who makes a good buck and has never been out of work a single day since graduating from the University of Illinois, back before the earth's crust cooled. When we moved to the Cleveland area in 1983, we were able to buy a lovely house in South Euclid for a very modest price, so we have never been burdened by unreasonable debt. Our son has always gone to the quite wonderful public schools here. The success of the first two books allowed me to fund my son's college tuition at the University of Toledo, but he's helped a lot by getting fabulous grades and a couple of generous merit scholarships. My big personal indulgence has been to hire Terry Wade and Daphne Robinson, who come once a week to keep the house up to standards my clean-crazy Italian *nonna* would have admired. You may notice that Teresina and Dafne do the same for Mirella Soncini in *A Thread of Grace*.

Q: What are your favorite books, and what makes them special to you?

MDR: In science fiction, two books stand out. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* was the first novel I read twice, and then again every few years. She brought an anthropological sensibility to science fiction that I appreciated. There were multiple cultures, multiple languages, and the inevitable misunderstandings that result when a stranger is coping with utterly foreign concepts. I loved the device of an unreliable narrator, and reread this book before beginning *The Sparrow*, to study how she used literary aikido on her readers. The second book is Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. That book, too, is decades old, but stands up to rereading well. Again, there is a theme of well-intentioned misunderstanding of language, and a sort of archaeological approach to science fiction, this time with an appealing religious twist: after a nuclear holocaust, literacy is preserved in isolated Catholic monasteries. Among more recent books, I lean toward the kind of exquisite and hilarious observation of contemporary society that Karen Joy Fowler provides in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, and I loved her earlier World War II home front novel *The Sweetheart Season*. Karen has a way of making devastatingly funny remarks about less-than-admirable behavior, without ever being nasty or hurtful to the person involved. Another author whose work is both laugh-aloud funny and ironic, but also slyly sweet, is David Sosnowski. In his novel *Vamped*,

he takes modern American culture and twists it around a single fictional fact: what if vampires were not only real, but eventually vamped nearly the entire population of the world? (Each meal makes a new vampire — a logical outcome of vampirism nobody else seems to have noted.) David makes you believe that this is just how America would react: with marketing campaigns for vacations in Alaska during the winter (no sun for six months, get it?) and illegal hunting trips for “free range” human blood. On my Web site, www.marydoriarussell.info, there’s a list of other books I’ve enjoyed, along with an annotated bibliography for *A Thread of Grace*.

Q: What are some of your favorite films, and what makes them unforgettable to you?

MDR: I seem to gravitate toward big operatic movies: *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Godfather*, *Tombstone*. I like a moral and literary structure, the sense of trying to live by some moral code, even when society is debased by war or crime. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are comedies that my family and I watch until we know the entire script by heart. *The Princess Bride* and *Young Frankenstein* were early favorites. And then there’s Guy Ritchie’s *Snatch*, which is nonstop violence and obscenity, but somehow not offensive! And I love movies with great dancing: Bob Fosse’s *All That Jazz*, Carlos Saura’s flamenco *Carmen*.

Q: What types of music do you like? Is there any particular kind you like to listen to when you’re writing?

MDR: There’s a theme here: big, emotional, layered stuff appeals to me. I love arena rock albums like Van Halen’s *5150* and Def Leppard’s *Hysteria*. To me, those have the same fist-in-the-air power that Beethoven’s odd-numbered symphonies have. And I love every other Sting album. Cerebral and beautiful — gotta love a guy who can work curriculum vitae into a pop song. And no, I don’t listen to music as I write. I have to have quiet for that.

Q: Many writers are hardly overnight-success stories. How long did it take for you to get where you are today? Any rejection-slip horror stories or inspirational anecdotes?

MDR: Well, my story is that thirty-one agents turned *The Sparrow* down before Jane Dystel finally decided to take me on as a client. I don’t know if that’s inspirational or depressing, but it’s true.

Q: What was the book that most influenced your life or your career as a writer — and why?

MDR: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) by T. E. Lawrence. I saw the David Lean movie *Lawrence of Arabia* when it first came out in 1962. I was twelve then, and ripe for hero worship, and ready to imagine a larger world than Lombard, Illinois. I found a musty old copy of *Seven Pillars*, and to this day I remain fascinated by the book and the man who wrote it. I can name a number of direct effects of reading the book. Initially, I became interested in archaeology because of Lawrence's early years, and that led me to anthropology, which sustained my interest through three degrees and years of professional work. I keep my hand in by editing the professional papers of friends in the field. Lawrence taught me that speaking more than one language opens doors to experiences you'd miss if you speak only English. Over the years, I've studied Spanish, Russian, French, and Croatian formally, with less studious stabs at Latin, Hebrew, Italian, and German. Each one has led me places I'd never have gone otherwise. Lawrence taught me that *how* you write is as important as what you have to tell about. Choice of word, rhythm, detail, editing, and overall structure make *Seven Pillars* literature, not just a military history or personal memoir. There are echoes of Lawrence's experience in Deraa in my first novel, echoes of his war guilt in my third. I learned from *Seven Pillars* that intentions are irrelevant and regrets are useless: it doesn't matter what you thought would happen, or that you meant no harm. Unintended consequences of good intentions is a theme I return to. I also caught the colon habit from reading his work: *quod erat demonstrandum*.

Q: What are you working on now?

MDR: *Dreamers of the Day* is a novel about the 1921 Cairo Peace Conference. After the first World War, a handful of British and French diplomats got together in a nice hotel for a few days, took some fun camel rides out to see the pyramids and get their pictures taken, gossiped, flirted, argued — oh, yes, and invented the modern Middle East. I'll come full circle with this one: T. E. Lawrence will actually be a character in the story, along with Lady Gertrude Bell, Winston Churchill, Chaim Weitzman, and Prince Feisal of the Hashemite royal family.

Q: If you could choose one new writer to be “discovered,” who would it be — and why?

MDR: I would love to give a leg up to a young poet named Gary ten the libretto for an opera based on *The Sparrow* by the Puerto Rican composer Raymond Torres-Santos. And Gary will be collaborating on a project with me soon.

Q: What tips or advice do you have for writers still looking to be discovered?

MDR: Don't rely on other writers to critique your work. Find passionate readers who know what they like and why. Ask them to read your drafts, and tell you what works and what doesn't, where they didn't buy a motive or believe in a character, when the dialog was clunky, or the description hackneyed. It's thrilling to be part of someone else's creative process, and good readers can be better than another writer for diagnosis and even prescription. I rely heavily on a team of friends who can criticize my work without breaking my heart or discouraging me, and I give them a lot of the credit for the success of my own novels.

Courtesy of Ballantine Books

Discussion Questions

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?

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