
The Sparrow

by Mary Doria Russell

“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 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's memory was being exposed to a scathing round of public criticism for his treatment of native peoples and the environment. In her story, as she told an Amazon.com interviewer, she set out to portray “modern well-educated people... [in] the same state of radical ignorance that the early missionaries and explorers experienced when they first made contact with the New World.”

After eighteen months and thirty-one rejections, and with agents perhaps scared off by the science fiction label--which suggested a small print run and a low advance--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

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fiction, and *The Sparrow* was published in 1996 and became a selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club and other book clubs. Booksellers and readers developed a sort of missionary zeal for the novel, Russell says, 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.” “Russell’s first novel,” added Tom De Haven in *Entertainment Weekly*, “is finally a parable about faith—the search for God, in others as well as *Out There*. What’s found during the missionaries’ visit to Rakhat is not at all reassuring or comforting. But only the most deceitful novels tell us what we’d like to hear. Important novels leave deep cracks in our beliefs, our prejudices, and our blinders. *The Sparrow* is one of them.”

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. Misunderstandings between cultures and people are at the heart of her story. 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*.” McCaffrey described the novel as “compelling and chilling.” 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.” “Whether one likes science fiction or not,” the critic continued, 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.”

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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 holds a great interest for Russell.

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."

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. Addresses: Homeoffice: 4083 Princeton Blvd., South Euclid, OH 44121. Agent: Jane Dystel Literary Management, 1 Union Square W., New York, NY 10003. E-mail: MDRussell@literati.net.

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*.

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.

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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.

Contributor to scientific journals and periodicals, including American Journal of Physical Anthropology.
Author of technical manuals, 1986-92.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- America, January 4, 1997, Andrew J. Krivak, review of The Sparrow, p. 19; April 18, 1998, Andrew J. Krivak, review of Children of God, p. 25.
- 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.
- Bookwatch, December, 1996, p. 7.
- Christian Science Monitor, November 13, 1996, p. 15.
- Commonweal, February 28, 1997, p. 27.
- Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 1996, p. 1085.
- 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.
- New York Times Book Review, December 15, 1996, p. 39.
- Publishers Weekly, September 9, 1996, review of The Sparrow, p. 64; February 2, 1998, review of Children of God, p. 80.
- U.S. Catholic, July, 1997, p. 6.

ONLINE

- Amazon.com, <http://www.amazon.com/> (December 6, 1997), interview with Russell.
- Mary Doria Russell Home page, <http://literati.net/Russell> (August 28, 2004).
- Mary Doria Russell Web site, <http://users.adelphia.net/~druss44121> (July 10, 2004).

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