



Sarah's Key: a novel **by Tatiana De Rosnay**

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New York : St. Martin's Griffin

Pages: 320 pgs.

Includes readers' guide.

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Summary (from the publisher)

On the anniversary of the roundup of Jews by the French police in Paris, Julia is asked to write an article on this dark episode and embarks on an investigation that leads her to long-hidden family secrets and to the ordeal of Sarah. 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.

Description

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.

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. De Rosnay's U.S. debut fictionalizes the 1942 Paris roundups and deportations, in which thousands of Jewish families were arrested, held at the Vélodrome d'Hiver outside the city, then transported to Auschwitz. Forty-five-year-old Julia Jarmond, American by birth, moved to Paris when she was 20 and is married to the arrogant, unfaithful Bertrand Tézac, with whom she has an 11-year-old daughter. Julia writes for an American magazine and her editor assigns her to cover the 60th anniversary of the Vél' d'Hiv' roundups. Julia soon learns that the apartment she and Bertrand plan to move into was acquired by Bertrand's family when its Jewish occupants were dispossessed and deported 60 years before. She resolves to find out what happened to the former occupants: Wladyslaw and Rywka Starzynski, parents of 10-year-old Sarah and four-year-old Michel. The more Julia discovers—especially about Sarah, the only member of the Starzynski family to survive—the more she uncovers about Bertrand's family, about France and, finally, herself. Already translated into 15 languages, the novel is De Rosnay's 10th (but her first written in English, her first language). It beautifully conveys Julia's conflicting loyalties, and makes Sarah's trials so riveting, her innocence so absorbing, that the book is hard to put down.

From the South Florida Jewish Journal

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.

From Library Journal

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

Biography

<http://www.tatianaderosnay.com/>



(Born Sept. 28, 1961) Tatiana de Rosnay was born in the suburbs of Paris and is of English, French and Russian descent. She is the author of nine French novels. She also writes for French Elle, and is a literary critic for Psychologies magazine. Tatiana de Rosnay is married and has two children. Sarah's Key is her first novel written in her mother tongue, English.

Bibliography

De Rosnay is the author of 9 French novels. Sarah's key is her first novel translated into English.

1992 : L'appartement témoin, Fayard.

1995 : Mariés, pères de famille, Plon.

1996 : Le Dîner des ex, Plon.

1998 : Le Cœur d'une autre, Plon.

2000 : Le Voisin, Plon.

2003 : La Mémoire des murs, Plon.

2004 : Spirales, Plon.

2006 : Moka, Plon.

2006 : Elle s'appelait Sarah (titre original : Sarah's Key), traduit de l'anglais par Agnès Michaux, Éditions Héloïse d'Ormesson ; réédité en livre de poche en 2008. Récompensé par plusieurs prix dont le prix des libraires et le Prix Gabrielle d'Estrées[5].

2009 : Boomerang, éditions Héloïse d'Ormesson.

From the Author's website

Are Sarah and her family based on people who really existed in 1942 ?

No, Sarah and her family come straight out of my imagination. But my daughter Charlotte, who was 11 years old when I wrote this book, was a major source of inspiration for Sarah. Sarah's brother's destiny is also an event I imagined, although I do believe it could have happened in real life.

Are you Julia Jarmond ?

No, although many of my readers think so ! Julia is American, I am half- English, half – French. I have a wonderful husband who has nothing to do with Julia's arrogant husband, Bertrand ! I do not have a daughter called Zoe, but a son named Louis and a daughter, Charlotte, who are now 20 and 18. The only thing I have in common with Julia is that we are the same age and are both journalists.

How long did it you take to write Sarah's Key ?

It took me one year to research it, two years to write it, and two years to get it published !

What sort of research did you do to write Sarah's Key?

I read everything I could concerning the round-up. (That book list is at the back of Sarah's Key in its French version, or on the Sarah's Key Blog.) I went to Beaune la Rolande and Drancy, several times. And I met Vel d'Hiv survivors, which were unforgettable moments.

How is the movie coming along ?

The movie, starring Kristin Scott-Thomas as Julia Jarmond and Mélusine Mayance as Sarah, is being filmed ! It will be on French screens in 2010. It is produced by Hugo Films and directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner. Serge Joncour wrote the script. It is very faithful to my book.

What language did you originally write Sarah's Key in and why ?

I wrote it in English. I felt that writing about such a sensitive French subject would somehow be easier for me if I used my "English" side, which gave me a certain distance. My father is French and my mother is British and I grew up in France, USA and UK, learning both languages at the same time. All my previous published work is in French, but since Sarah's Key, I now write in English.

How many languages has Sarah's Key been translated into ? I believe it is now 32, which never ceases to amaze me.

What is your next book about and when will it be published ? Boomerang was published in France and Holland in 2009, and I wrote it in English. Ten countries will now publish it. It is the story of a modern man confronted with a dark family truth, and who will meet love in an very unexpected way. It is about love (a first for me !), death, parents, children and secrets...And I am now working on a new book which takes place in Paris, in the 19th century.

Author Interview from Reading Group Guides

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_s/sarahs_key2.asp#bio

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.

Blogpost from the Author

I wrote Sarah's Key in a way I had never written any other book before. I guess you can say I wrote it with my guts. This was the first time in my life I was writing a book about something that actually happened so I was very careful with dates and places. Some of the passages were very hard to write because I knew this is how it had really happened. This is what happened to those children, to those families.

After I'd written about 20 pages, I gave them to my husband, Nicolas, to read, as he is my first reader. I noticed he was taking a long time reading them, and I wondered why. Then he said to me when he had finished, "This is good, very powerful, you must go on." And then he asked, "Why did you write it in English?" (He is French and not bilingual like me.) I hadn't even noticed I had written it in my mother tongue. It was a surprise! But I knew why. Being half French, half English, I felt I had to retreat into my English side to write about this dark part of French history. So I went on writing Sarah's Key in English, although my previous published books were all in French. Also, having an American heroine, Julia, made it impossible for me to envisage her speaking in French. Many of my readers think I'm Julia Jarmond. No, I'm not. I am French, she is American, her husband is not mine,

thank God! And her marriage is not mine either! But I guess Julia and I share the same horror, the same emotion, concerning the fate of the Vel d'Hiv children.

Writing this book has changed my life. I learned the truth about a certain part of my country's history. I learned it late and I learned it hard, and I still feel a scar when I think about those children. I am French, and this happened in my country, sixty-six years ago, in my city, just ten minutes from where I live.

When I recently toured the USA last November for Sarah's Key with the Jewish Book Council, I realized how much my book was being read and discussed for book clubs. I was, of course, thrilled. As an Anglo-French writer based in France, I must admit that in my country book clubs aren't so big, alas.

From the Mother Daughter BookClub interview

How did you decide to become a writer?

I was 11 years old and had just read Anne Frank's diary, was terribly moved by it, and decided to start my own diary. Then I read *The Young Visitors* by Daisy Ashford, who had published her first book at nine years old. I found it most inspiring, so I wrote a 90-paged novel for my mother's birthday on a school note book. It was called "A girl named Carrie," the story of a poor little rich girl in 19th century London. My mother was thankfully very enthusiastic. And so I decided to pursue the experience, and every year, I wrote a novel for my family and kept writing my diary. But I didn't seek publication until my late twenties.

Can you tell us a little about your background and where you live?

My father is French, of Russian descent and my mother is British. I was born in France, and raised in the USA where my father taught at MIT in Boston as a scientist. I then went to high school in Paris, and then on to college in England. I now live in Paris with my husband and children.

There are many stories about the Holocaust. What makes Sarah's Key different?

Maybe the fact that there are two voices in the book, a voice from the past and a voice from the present is what makes it different.

When did you become familiar with the round up of Jews in Paris, referred to as the Vel d'Hiv?

Like most French school children of my generation, I was not taught about this event at school, during the 70's. I heard about it for the first time through President Chirac's speech in 1995. He was the first French president to publicly acknowledge the role of the French police during the Vel d'Hiv round-up.

What made you want to write about it?

I was appalled by what I discovered concerning the roundup, especially about what happened to those 4,000 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—I am not a historian—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.

What other kind of research did you conduct before writing your story?

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. I read everything I could concerning the round-up and I met Vel d'Hiv survivors, other unforgettable moments.

How long did it take you to write Sarah's Key?

It took me two years, including my research.

Why did you decide to tell this story in two eras-Paris during World War II and in modern times?

The idea for the book came to me that way: linking two stories. Sarah's story, seen through the eyes of a little Parisian girl forced to wear a yellow star and whose life dramatically changed in July 1942. And then Julia's story, today, an American married to a French man. Because she is commissioned by her magazine to write about the Vel d'Hiv's anniversary, she plunges into the horror of July '42. That way, through Julia's modern story, I could reveal the taboos and scars that the Vel d'Hiv has left in France, sixty years later.

I understand people affected by the Holocaust have been touched by your book. Would you please share a story or two about that?

I met several Vel d'Hiv survivors who had read my book. They are in their 70s and 80s, but when I look at them, I see the children they used to be. Suzy C. is my neighbor, she lives directly above me. She moved in a couple of years ago, just as I was finishing the book. She is in her 80's, a wonderful, chirpy, small, round woman, with bright blue eyes. Her husband Maurice is also the most fantastic old gentleman. One day, just before *Sarah's Key* was due to be published in France, I meet Suzy in a shop on our street and we have a little chat. She asks me what my new book is about, and I tell her. All of a sudden, her face goes very pale. She stops smiling. She puts a hand on my arm. We are in a noisy shop, but it seems to have become very silent. She says "Tatiana, on July 16th 1942 I was your daughter's age. The French police came to our home at dawn. They took our mother but they wouldn't take me or my sister. We begged to be taken with mother; we had no idea where they were going, what was going to happen. But they wouldn't hear of it. They shoved us away and ordered us to take off our stars. We didn't know it yet, but that day, they saved our lives. Our mother never came back and after the war, we found out she had been exterminated at Auschwitz." Later on, Suzy read my book. I was nervous about how she was going to react. But when I knocked on her door, she opened and just took me into her arms. Tears were running down her face. "Tatiana, thank you for writing this book. France needs to remember. The youngest generations need to know."

You have a teenaged daughter. How did you talk to her about Sarah's Key?

When I started to write *Sarah's Key*, my daughter was 11 years old, so technically she wasn't a teenager yet! I told her and my son, who is two years older than she, all about this book; they were very much involved in its writing process. I took them to Beaune la Rolande, explained all I knew about the round-up. I guess both of them grew up with this book. This book is part of their lives !

Can you share with us what you're working on now?

I have just finished "Boomerang," which will be published in France in April 2009. Not quite sure yet about the US publication date! It's a love story with a dark twist. My hero is a 40-year-old man, Antoine, who will have to deal with a heavy family secret coming back like a boomerang. But in the middle of confusion and pain, he will fall in love. I've never written about love before, it was quite a wonderful experience!

Right now, I am now researching my new book, which takes place in 19th century Paris...

Discussion Questions (from Reading Goup Guides.com)

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?

Discussion Questions (from Hachette group, Australia)

This book is composed of two interwoven threads: Sarah's story in 1942 and Julia's quest in 2002. What are the strengths and drawbacks of this narrative form? Which 'voice' did you prefer and why?

What different feelings does Sarah experience throughout the trauma of the round-up and its aftermath? How do you think you would have reacted as a ten-year old child?

How does Julia Jarmond consider France and the French? Do you agree with her?

How would you characterise Julia and Bertrand's marriage and how does Julia's character evolve over the course of the novel?

How does Julia's daughter Zoë help and support her mother? How does she echo the other little girl in the story, Sarah?

This novel is built around several family secrets. What are these secrets? Was Julia right to go so far? Is it sometimes better not to know?

Julia discovers disturbing events concerning French collaboration with the Nazis during the war. Did you learn of any historical events you previously did not know about? Which ones struck you the most?

What do you imagine happens after the end of the novel? What do you think Julia's life will be like now? What has she learnt?

Many readers were moved to tears by certain passages in this book. Discuss whether this was your case, or not, and which were the passages that moved you and why.

The rue de Saintonge apartment is a key element to this story, bringing past and present together through a secret tragedy. Discuss how you would feel living in such a place. Do you think walls remember?

Readalikes for *Sarah's Key*

Suggestions provided by Sioux City Library

<http://www.siouxcitylibrary.org/Documents/09-sarahsweb.pdf>

City of Thieves: A Novel by David Benioff

While investigating the siege of Leningrad, a young writer learns how his grandfather tried to escape his execution by trying to secure eggs for a wedding cake.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas: A Fable by John Boyne

A heart-wrenching story of an unlikely friendship between the Nazi Commandant's young son and a boy from the other side of the concentration camp fence.

The Welsh Girl: A Novel by Peter Ho Davies

The story of 17-year-old Esther, the daughter of a Welsh shepherd, and her challenges, loves, and discoveries during World War II.

The Madonnas of Leningrad: A Novel by Debra Dean

Alternating between life in present-day America and a past life in the Soviet Union, an elderly Russian woman recalls her experience during the siege of Leningrad.

Never Surrender: A Novel of Winston Churchill by Michael Dobbs

A fictional account of the life and challenges of Winston Churchill during the Second World War.

Consequences: A Novel by Penelope Lively

A love story connecting three generations starts with the heartache of Lorna and Matt during World War II.

Silesian Station by David Downing

Living in Berlin on the eve of Germany's invasion of Poland, an English-American journalist is forced to become a spy. Additional complications arise when he takes a personal interest in the case of a Jewish country girl who's gone missing in the big city.

Pictures at an Exhibition by Sara Houghteling

Houghteling creates a fictionalized account of the Nazi's systematic looting of France's art treasures. Following the war, the son of a Jewish gallery owner tries to recover his family's stolen art.

Night of Flames: A Novel of World War II by Douglas W. Jacobson

Separated by war, a husband and wife must find a path to each other.

A Hatred for Tulips: A Novel by Richard Lourie (Lou)

An old man recalls the struggle to feed his starving family during the Nazi occupation in Amsterdam, and the devastating chain of events it set in motion for a young girl named Anne Frank.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

A young girl's love of books will save her life when the Allies bomb Munich during the Second World War.