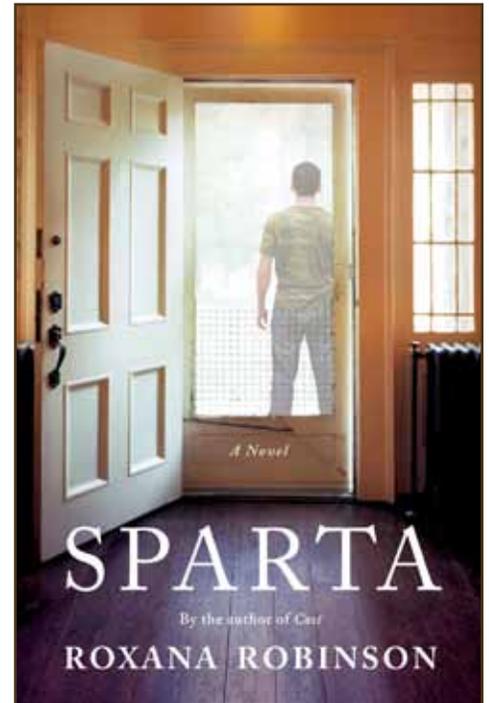


Reading Group Gold

Sparta

by Roxana Robinson



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Giving voice to one of the most crucial issues of our time, the acclaimed novelist Roxana Robinson has created a portrait of the walking wounded among America’s veterans—soldiers who have no physical scars but who cannot overcome the emotional traumas of Operation Iraqi Freedom and its otherworldly horrors. In *Sparta*, Conrad Farrell’s family has no military heritage, but as a classics major at Williams College, Conrad is drawn to the Marine Corps ethic: “Semper Fidelis” came straight from the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, where every citizen doubled as a full-time soldier. After college, Conrad joins the Marines and is deployed to Iraq at the height of U.S. attempts to democratize a nation overrun by brutal factions.

Returning home to New York’s Westchester County after four years of honorable service, Conrad appears to be in perfect shape: he hasn’t been shot, he was never wounded by an IED, and he sticks to a tough workout routine. As strong as he is, it’s soon apparent that the transition from war to peace may destroy him. As he attempts to reconnect with the people and places he once loved, he is haunted by psychological demons. The survival tactics that brought him home safely are now his worst enemy, winding his psyche into a taut knot of fear and guilt. Picturing dangers and destruction at every turn while questioning the value of his mission in Iraq, he tries to navigate a homeland that no longer feels like home to him. He longs for help—from his family, his girlfriend, his fellow troops, the VA—but each attempt to reach out ends disastrously.

Capturing the nuances of the unique estrangement that modern soldiers face as they attempt to rejoin the society they’ve fought for, *Sparta* is a powerful testament to the moral consequences of war, for civilians and soldiers alike. The following questions are designed to enhance your experience of Roxana Robinson’s moving story and your reading group’s discussion.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Explore the novel's title. How does the description of Spartan life in chapter 4 compare to the life of a U.S. soldier in the twenty-first century? Why was Conrad drawn to classicism? Did he experience any of those ideals as a modern American warrior?
2. If you were in Claire's position, how would you respond to Conrad's homecoming? Ultimately, what does he need from her, and from all his loved ones? What makes it hard for him get his needs met without turning people away?
3. What are some of the differences between Marshall's and Lydia's approaches to their children? Despite her career as a successful therapist, why is Lydia mystified by Conrad's symptoms, culminating in chapter 24, when she rejects his rage by telling him, "I can't stand this. Con, you have to do something about this"?
4. How did Ali change Conrad's perspective on privilege and political struggles? What common fears did they share?
5. As Conrad observes the dramatic changes in Go-Go's value system, what does he discover about the way he and his friends have changed since graduation? Are we our true selves during our college years, or is that just an experimental phase? Do the demands of adulthood transform us into our true selves?
6. From chapter 5, where the factions of Fallujah are explained, what clarity did you gain? How did an American soldier's duties in Iraq compare to those of armed forces in Vietnam and Korea?
7. While being with Jenny, what does Conrad discover about growing older and the changes that took place while he was away? As he walks familiar ground in Katonah and Manhattan, what has changed within him? What did his military service cost him?
8. What does Conrad's heartrending experience with the VA and his session with Dr. Chandler reveal about the high suicide rates among U.S. soldiers and veterans? What would it take to fully fund psychiatric care in the military and rank it alongside weapons and armor in importance?
9. As Conrad remembers Carleton, Olivera, Anderson, and others, what emotions does he experience beyond guilt? How does his network of survivors cope with the seemingly trivial, naive nature of civilian life?
10. Everyone in Conrad's world seems to have a purpose tied to meaningful work. Despite his damaged psyche, Conrad tries to find a new mission, enrolling in an economics class and forcing himself through the GMAT. How did his perception of a meaningful life radically change when he enlisted?

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11. What truths are finally spoken at the end of chapter 24? How does the Farrells' response to trauma compare to your family's? Throughout the novel, Conrad told himself that he must keep certain truths from his family. Was he right?
12. What makes Conrad's relationship with Ollie special? What is Ollie able to see and do that the other family members—and the VA clinician—can't?
13. In what ways can fiction sometimes capture reality better than a history book? How did Conrad's story affect your understanding of the challenges faced by veterans and the aftermath of modern warfare?
14. What themes of healing are woven throughout this and other fiction you've read by Roxana Robinson? What is both unique and universal about Conrad's experience?

PRAISE FOR *SPARTA*

“Roxana Robinson’s *Sparta* delicately explores the fissures between the military experience and civilian life with this portrait of a liberal northeastern family and what happens when their son, a young Marine lieutenant, returns home from Iraq irrevocably changed. This book is not simply about war, but about the horror and enforced isolation of trauma, the inevitable merging of the personal and the political, and the possibilities and trials found within the bonds of familial and romantic love.” —Phil Klay, author of “Redeployment”

“Roxana Robinson’s *Sparta* is a feat of the imagination. Vividly and with unflinching wisdom, Robinson has given voice, substance, and profound reality to her protagonist, Conrad Farrell of the Marine Corps—and in so doing, to thousands of veterans like him.” —Claire Messud, author of *The Woman Upstairs* and *The Emperor’s Children*

“*Sparta* gives us an unflinching portrayal of the costs of war, costs that go far beyond what the tallies of killed and wounded can tell us. There are plenty of losses that can be measured only in the language of the spirit, and it’s books such as this one, *necessary* books, that guide us to a fuller appreciation of war’s costs.” —Ben Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roxana Robinson is the author of four novels, including *Cost* (Sarah Crichton Books, 2008); three collections of short stories; and the biography *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Life*. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *More*, and *Vogue*, among other publications.

Guide written by Amy Clements