



SARAH'S KEY

by Tatiana de Rosnay

In Her Own Words

- A Conversation with Tatiana de Rosnay

Keep on Reading

- Reading Group Questions

*A
Reading
Group Gold
Selection*

For more reading group suggestions
visit www.readinggroupgold.com



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Conversation with Tatiana de Rosnay

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

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 Web site describing the rue Nélaton, in the 15th arrondissement, not far from where I live. That was where the great Vel' d'Hiv' roundup took place on July 16, 1942.

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

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

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

As I progressed through my research, I was moved, appalled by what I discovered concerning the Vel' d'Hiv' 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, 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 '40s.

Are there any parallels between you and Julia? Can you tell us a bit about your French husband and his family? What do they think of your novel, and the issues it raises?

Julia is American and I am French, born in France, of a French father and a British mother. I based her on my

"I was not taught about [Vel' d'Hiv'] at school... it still seemed to be shrouded by some kind of taboo."



American friends living in Paris. However, most of my readers are convinced I *am* Julia. At first this annoyed me somewhat, but in the end, I take it to be a magnificent compliment that I have created a character who could really exist and that women can identify with! The only thing Julia and I have in common is our age, our job (I'm also a journalist), and I "gave" Julia the horror I felt when I first discovered what happened to the Vel' d'Hiv' children.

My husband's family has nothing to do with Bertrand Tézac's family, they are far more relaxed! Nor does my wonderful husband, Nicolas, have anything to do with arrogant Bertrand. I think—and hope—that my in-laws approve of my book and the issues it raises, and are proud of me. As for Nicolas, he is my first reader, and he believed in *Sarah's Key* from the moment he read the first pages.

Speaking of your writing career, who are your top three favorite authors and/or books—and why?

I am in awe of Daphne du Maurier, the author of *Rebecca*, for the way she is able to mix sheer psychological suspense with aspects of ordinary life. Émile Zola, whom I have been reading since my teens, is my favorite French author: I love his powerful descriptions of old, forgotten Paris. His first novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, with its terrifying ending, is in my eyes a masterpiece. On a more contemporary note, I admire Tracy Chevalier's work (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*), and the way she is able to plunge her reader into the past using a perfect balance of emotion and history.

When did you start writing?

I first started writing novels when I was eleven years old, in 1972. I was an avid bookworm



Photo Credit: Arnaud Février

“Most of my readers are convinced I am Julia.”

and several books inspired me: Anne Frank’s diary, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, and *The Young Visitors* 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 Named Carey,” an 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 firmly convinced I was going to be a writer.

Describe your writing process.

I start writing each of my novels on small black Moleskine notebooks and then continue with the computer, but go back to the notebook if I get stuck. I write my book everyday, even on weekends and holidays (but this upsets my family, so I try not to). I hate it when someone talks to me while I’m writing or if the phone rings and I can get quite irritable, so I often write late at night or early in the morning. I read out loud from my book and sometimes cringe when I do so. I get back to work till I don’t cringe at the next reading. I have three first readers, Nicolas (my husband), Julia, and Laure. I wouldn’t dream of letting anyone else read my work before they do.

I’m often asked if, as a writer, I have any quirks and idiosyncrasies. Well, yes I do. I can’t stand it if a door is opened behind me and someone walks in as I’m writing. I like to have a window in front of me, not a blank wall. I eat Cachou Lajaunies as I write, and if you’re not French, you won’t know what that is (subtle hint: your tongue goes black after a couple . . .). I drink Earl Grey while I write and when the tea gets cold, I make another pot. I can’t listen to music while I work. I admire writers who are able to do this. When I feel I’m getting nowhere in my book, I come back to it later and write something else, an article, a blog post, an e-mail, a short story. A poem? Nope, haven’t written a poem since the ’80s. Thank God!



Please share a few words about the process of writing *Sarah's Key*.

Writing *Sarah's Key* was a powerful experience. First of all, reverting to my mother tongue, English, after years of writing novels in French felt exhilarating, like coming home after a long trip.

English is a language that is more emotional to me, because it's linked to my mother. My mother is British and my father is French—actually he's not very French, he's Mauritian and Russian, so I'm not that French after all. I was born in France, but English is the first language I learned. Also, with my heroine Julia Jarmond being American, I couldn't envision her speaking in French, it would be like seeing a dubbed movie. And finally, writing from my English side gave me the distance I needed in order to explore this black episode of French history.

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 precedent that cannot be forgotten despite time going by. My visits there were poignant and memorable.

***Sarah's Key* has two interwoven stories: Sarah's in 1942 and Julia's in the present. Which part did you most enjoy writing?**

I am not a historian and did not wish to write a historical novel. I also wanted to have a modern-day heroine in order to reveal the shame and taboo that the Vel' d'Hiv' round-up still sparks today. And I did feel that alternating Julia's and Sarah's stories gave a certain pace to the book, and made Sarah's part less "heavy."

*In Her Own
Words*

The Sarah part set in 1942 was difficult to write, but I learned so much from it, from my research, for one thing, but also from Sarah's bravery, her relentlessness. She was a wonderful and moving character to create. Julia's modern story was easier in a way, and I did enjoy imagining her life as an American in Paris.

Is Sarah based on a real-life person?

Sarah is a fictional character, but she bears an uncanny resemblance to my daughter Charlotte, who was ten years old when I was researching this novel between 2001 and 2003. I remember thinking, watching my daughter laugh and play, Sarah was exactly this age when horror came into her life.

Are there any other "forgotten" moments of history that interest you?

Yes, I'm interested in aspects of the French Revolution and in particular the ransacking and looting of all the royal remains at the Saint-Denis Cathedral which is not a very well known fact even here in France. The Haussmann era also draws me. And I recently read *Tokyo* by Mo Hayder and realized I did not know much about the Nanking massacre. The Great Fire of London is also one my interests, and Jack the Ripper—all very macabre, I must say!



Reading Group Questions

Reading
Group
Gold



1. What did you know about France's role in World War II—and the Vel' d'Hiv' roundup 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. 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?
5. What are the major themes of *Sarah's Key*?
6. Tatiana de Rosnay's novel is built around several "key" secrets that Julia unearths. Discuss the element of mystery in these pages. What types of narrative devices does the author use to keep the reader guessing?

Keep on
Reading

7. 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 herself?
8. 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 Vel' d'Hiv' memorial also informs). 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?
9. What does it take for a novelist to bring a historical event to life? To what extent do you think de Rosnay took artistic liberties with this work?
10. Why *do* modern readers enjoy novels about the past? How and when can a powerful piece of fiction be a history lesson in itself?
11. 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 ourselves—from Sarah's story?