



A SECRET KEPT

by Tatiana de Rosnay

About the Author

- A Conversation with Tatiana de Rosnay

Behind the Novel

- “How Writing *Sarah’s Key* Changed My Life”
An Original Essay by the Author

Keep on Reading

- Recommended 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

The first chapter of *A Secret Kept* really hooks you in. Is that the most difficult part to get right?

I find that—and this goes for my tastes as a reader, not only as a writer—I love being hooked into a book immediately. The opening lines of a book are so important. You really need to somehow charm your reader. If you can't get her attention in the first pages you may have lost her. There has to be an ambience. Not necessarily the entire cast of characters but something that is planted into the reader's mind so she'll say "What's going to happen?"

"I...know a lot more about men than I used to."

Was it hard writing from a male perspective?

It wasn't the first time I'd done it but it was the first time I did it with such honesty and lucidity. Previously I'd written a couple of novels where men were heroes but I did it tongue in cheek, making fun of men in not a very nice way but I was a lot younger in those days. Now, as I'm approaching fifty, I probably know a lot more about men than I used to. I think Antoine comes out as a very realistic character. Most of my readers think he really does exist and I've modelled him after somebody but he's an imaginary figure. My next book—the one I'm going to write this summer—will have a male hero.

Is that the ultimate compliment, when someone assumes the characters are real?

Yes. I get very touching e-mails from my male readers who say "thank you for writing this book and you've recognized something—you obviously know men quite well."

As someone who is truly bilingual do you ever find it hard to write completely in one language?

It's a complicated process. Sometimes it's a mere word or sentence that comes to me, if I'm writing the book in English, in French. It's not always easy to

deal with. Sometimes even during an interview somebody can ask me a question in English that I want to answer in French and vice versa—that's the story of my life!

You're very active on Facebook and Twitter—is that vital to success nowadays?

I was active on social media before I was a successful author. Don't forget that before *Sarah's Key* I sold 2,000 copies of each of my books in a good year. I had a blog at that point, I was already on Facebook. I wasn't on Twitter yet because that's only three years old. I've always been a geek so I've always used the Internet. Perhaps at first for self-promotion, as many authors do. Now I don't really need that anymore but it's a fantastic way to talk to my readers and let them know what I'm doing. I find it very useful.

I completely understand that some writers don't like it and shy away from that kind of thing but look at Joanne Harris. I met her on Twitter and have always adored her work. And now we're giving a talk together here in London next month. She actually tweets such funny things, she cracks me up! I sometimes don't have time to be so witty in my tweets. I tweet a lot about what I'm doing and where I am or if I'm unhappy or happy about something but I would never post anything personal. I've learned that.

And you sometimes have Facebook interactions with your characters?

It was my husband's idea to create Angèle Rouvatier's Facebook page and that was a huge success. She's such a powerful woman: She's a mortician; she drives a Harley-Davidson; she smokes Marlboros. It was so easy to create her Facebook page—she belongs to the Marlboro group, the Harley-Davidson group, she lives in the Vendée. We had no idea it would be such a success. The press really picked up on that in

About the Author

“Writing Sarah’s Key I learned the truth about a certain part of my country’s history...and I still feel a scar.”

France. Then, to my surprise, I started getting friendship requests from characters from my books! These are fans creating Facebook pages and completely respecting the code of each character. I find that a wonderful mark of sympathy for my books and what I do for them. It’s a fun way of making the characters live on.

Are you tempted to incorporate these Facebook interactions into your writing?

Yes. In my next novel—the book I haven’t started to write yet—it will be about a young male writer. I’m not going to tell you any more but quite a bit about the social networks and how we writers use them and the pitfalls. Sometimes disturbed people contact you and there are things you need to learn how to avoid as a writer. My young writer will make a couple of mistakes.

Your Twitter biography describes you as Franco-British with a zest of Russian. Do you identify with one more than the others?

I’m such a melting pot. My name comes from my Russian grandmother. She fled the Russian Revolution and she was an incredible character. She was the most ungrandmotherly grandmother you can imagine but such a fantastic optimist. I really miss her. It sounds corny to say you miss your grandmother but I really miss her.

The problem with being such a mix of nationalities is you don’t feel you’re one in particular. I was born in France but I don’t really feel French. Technically I’m half English, and I was raised in America. I’d say I feel a little bit of everything.



You've got such an amazing family tree. Have you considered writing your memoirs? (Tatiana is the great-great-granddaughter of Isambard Kingdom Brunel; granddaughter of Lord Jebb, Churchill's right-hand man, and painter Gaëtan de Rosnay; and daughter of scientist Joël de Rosnay.)

For the moment, no. I'm really into fiction and I don't think I could write anything else. But Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who is my great-great-great-grandfather, is unknown in France for some obscure reason. One of my plans would be to write about him. It would have to be a novel because there are so many books that exist here about him, after all he's a famous figure of this country—the only novelty I could give would be to track down the French connection. He is *franglais* like me—his father was French and his mother was British like me. I'm very interested in what he did and his life so one day something might come out of there but I'm not sure. It's circling 'round in my head but I have to really pinpoint it and work on it.

Who do you curl up with and read in the evening?

I read a lot of French and English writers but there are two writers that I really enjoy reading: one of them is Tracy Chevalier. I met her quite recently. I really enjoy her work. And my absolute British idol is Ian McEwan. Once I saw him fleetingly in a book fair in Oslo and I nearly died! I didn't muster up the courage to go up and speak with him but I was given the pen that he signed with all afternoon and I still have it, which goes to show how warped I am where he's concerned! I think he's brilliant.

About the Author



An Original Essay by the Author

“How Writing *Sarah’s Key* Changed My Life” by Tatiana de Rosnay

The idea for *Sarah’s Key* came to me by 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 Julia’s story, set in the present, an American married to a Frenchman. Because Julia is commissioned by her magazine to write about the Vel d’Hiv’s anniversary, she plunges into the horror of July ’42. In this way I could reveal the taboos and scars that the Vel d’Hiv has left in France, more than sixty years later.

*“[A]s a writer,
seeing your
work becoming
a film is
an amazing and
exciting event.”*

I started to write *Sarah’s Key* in a way I had never written anything before. I guess you can say I wrote it with my guts. Some of the passages were hard to write because I knew this is how it had happened. This is what happened to those children, to those families.

After I’d written about twenty 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 said: “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. 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.

When the book came out in France in 2007, I was worried about how the French Jewish community would react to it. How would they feel about a non-



Jewish woman writing about this highly sensitive part of France's past? And that's when the letters and e-mails started to come in. More and more each day. So moving that they made me cry. I met several Vel d'Hiv survivors who had read my book. They have become friends. They are in their seventies and eighties, but when I look at them, I see the children they used to be.

This book has now become a movie. I attended the filming of several scenes. It is a French movie, but parts of it are in English. Mélusine Mayance is the extraordinary actress who plays ten-year-old Sarah. When I first laid eyes on her, I couldn't believe it. Here was my Sarah, in real life! The Vel d'Hiv scenes were hard to watch. It was both sobering and moving to see 400 extras dressed in 1940s style, wearing the yellow star.

I then met Kristin Scott Thomas who plays Julia Jarmond. I think she is the perfect actress to play this role. She has been living in France for twenty years and told me she felt very close to Julia in spirit.

Many of my readers think I'm Julia Jarmond. Well, I'm not. I am French, she is American, her husband is not mine, thank God! But I guess Julia and I share the same horror, the same emotion, concerning the fate of the Vel d'Hiv children. I chose an American heroine because in a way I wanted to pay homage to the three years I spent in the United States as a child, when my father taught at MIT.

Writing *Sarah's Key* 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-nine years ago, in my city, just ten minutes from where I live.

Behind the Novel

I also wrote *A Secret Kept* directly in English. *A Secret Kept* is the story of a modern man confronted with a dark family truth, who will meet love in an unexpected way. It is about love (a first for me!), death, parents, children, and secrets—a very personal novel, as it comes close to my life in many ways. It is also the story of our modern lives today, as parents, as children, as siblings. It is about watching our parents become old people while our children become teenagers, both of which are not always easy. It is about caring and loving, and learning to communicate within a family.

I got the idea for this book thanks to my husband. He and I had invited his sister to Dinard in Brittany to surprise her for her fortieth birthday, where they had not been in thirty years. The whole weekend, memories kept coming back to them and as a writer it was fascinating to see. Memories of the beach, their grandparents, family meals, learning how to swim.... On the way home I told them, “I think you gave me an idea for my next book.” They said, “Oh that’s great, but don’t you need something more? Something stronger or darker?”

So I knew I had their story as a starting point—a story of a brother and sister going down memory lane, revisiting a place they went to as children—but I needed to have that extra twist. So I decided that the sister would have a disturbing flashback, which readers would discover throughout the book. I set the story not in Dinard, but in Noirmoutier, which is a beautiful island in Vendée, on the west coast of France. There is a submersible road there called the Gois Passage, which you can only use to get on the island at low tide, and it is a very Romanesque place. That road has a special significance in my novel and its symbolism and imagery play an impor-

tant part through the entire story. If you ever get to Noirmoutier, you need to see it.

A Secret Kept is about love—its secrets and its power, its magic, and I suppose its surprises. There is the love affair between Antoine and Angèle, but there is also the invisible love story you discover through the love letters in the book. I found it incredibly moving to write those letters. The sexy scenes between Antoine and Angèle were tricky to write, because I had to think from a man's point of view. But it was an enriching experience; writing about love is something that people have been doing for so many years, we will never tire of it.

My children are now nineteen and twenty-one, no longer really teenagers, but when I wrote this two or three years ago, I was drawing from my experience as a parent, understanding the issues that teens face and the limits and communication they need.

A Secret Kept is dedicated to my son's best friend who passed away suddenly at a young age. I asked my son if I could use his story as part of my book, and, although the details and characters are different, the emotions and how we came together as a family during this time are all there.

I worked very hard on creating Antoine. I worked hard to capture him as a lover, a husband, an ex-husband, a brother, a son, a father. I feel like I knew him intimately. If he walked into a room, I think I would recognize him and say hello. It was interesting to create the character of Angèle, because usually in my books, the women are more fragile and searching for something. Angèle was the first female character I imagined who wasn't searching for anything—instead, she was the helping hand to Antoine. I wanted to portray a man in that more fragile role. Yes, men have midlife crises too!

Behind the Novel

Angèle Rouvatier is a special character for me. I loved imagining her. She is strong, intelligent, sassy, beautiful. She rides a Harley, wears a black leather jacket, and she has a rather special job. She is a mortician. She knows a lot about life, and a lot about death. We often talk about midwives who bring us into this world, and we never talk about those who tend for us when we die.... I interviewed three female morticians to imagine Angèle's character and I was struck by the generosity and humanity of these women.

Angèle Rouvatier lives on Facebook and has 3,000 friends. People often ask me if she actually exists and if I wrote about a real person in the book. Angèle is a fictional character, but she will respond to any messages and posts. It's a very fun way to interact with fans and it's given a lot of other writers I know similar ideas for creating their characters on Facebook.

A Secret Kept is going to become a movie in France, which is exciting news. I can't wait to see who will play Angèle and Antoine, and Mélanie. I think that, as a writer, seeing your work becoming a film is an amazing and exciting event.



Recommended Reading

The Pursuit of Happiness
Douglas Kennedy

Charlotte Gray
Sebastian Faulks

Reservation Road
John Burnham Schwartz

My Dream of You
Nuala O'Faolain

Sophie's Choice
William Styron

Suite Française
Irène Némirovsky

After You'd Gone
Maggie O'Farrell

Resistance
Anita Shreve



*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Discuss the different narrative structures employed in *A Secret Kept*. What do you think the author intended to achieve with each? Do you prefer one over the others?
2. How does the author describe the classic, wealthy 16th arrondissement of Paris—where Blanche Rey's apartment and the avenue Kléber one are located—as opposed to where Antoine lives, on the Left Bank? What does this tell you about the Rey family?
3. Part of the novel takes place on Noirmoutier Island, which is connected to the west coast of France by the Gois Passage. Why is Antoine so attached to the Gois Passage? Do you see any parallels between the author's descriptions of this place and the story as a whole?
4. What was your impression of Antoine at the beginning of the book? What about at the end? Over the course of the novel, how does he change and what does he learn about himself?
5. Discuss the different themes and imagery of death that come up in the novel and that Antoine has to face. Did you find them morbid? Or realistic?
6. Did you like the character of the sexy, streetwise mortician Angèle Rouvatier? What makes her different from other heroines and what do you think she represents? In what ways does she have a hand in the changes in Antoine's character?



7. François and Antoine Rey are two opposite personalities, as fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Discuss specific differences you see. Do you believe Antoine will ever get through to his father? What exactly do you think François knows about Clarisse, her life, her death?
8. Clarisse Rey is the invisible woman of this book. Yet her letters, photos, and the film that Antoine watches at the end, as well as Gaspard's confession, gradually expose her. What kind of woman was she? What do we learn about her? Compare her to Angèle, Mélanie, and Astrid.
9. How do Mélanie and Antoine react differently when they discover the truth about their mother and her death? Why do you think that Melanie chooses not to remember? Do you think you would react more like Mélanie or Antoine?
10. This novel explores taboo subjects and family secrets in a conservative French bourgeois society. Discuss those subjects and whether they would be taboo if the novel were set in the United States. What do you think really happened the day Clarisse went to confront Blanche?
11. Do you personally believe that family secrets should be revealed or hidden forever? In cases like the novel's, do you think the truth is more painful than lying?

*Keep on
Reading*