



Sarah's key

By Tatiana de Rosnay

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Genre & subject

Women journalists - Paris (France) - Fiction

Paris (France) History - WWII - Fiction

Synopsis

De Rosnay's fictionalised account of the 1942 Paris roundups and deportations, in which thousands of Jewish families were arrested, held at the Velodrome d'Hiver outside the city and then transported to Auschwitz. Forty five year old Julia Jarmond, American by birth, moved to Paris when she was twenty and is married to the arrogant, unfaithful Bertrand Tezac, with whom she has an eleven year old daughter. Julia writes for an American magazine and her editor assigns her to cover the sixtieth anniversary of the Vel' 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 Sarah and 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.

Author biography

Tatiana de Rosnay was born on 28 September 1961 in the suburbs of Paris. She is of English, French and Russian descent. Her father is French scientist Joël de Rosnay, her grandfather was the painter Gaëtan de Rosnay. Tatiana's paternal great-grandmother was Russian actress Natalia Rachewskia. Tatiana is also the niece of historian Hugh Thomas.

Tatiana's mother is English; the daughter of diplomat and former Secretary-General of the United Nations and great-great-granddaughter of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the British engineer.

Tatiana was raised in Paris and then in Boston, when her father taught at MIT in the 1970s. She moved to England in the early 1980s and obtained a Bachelor's degree in English literature at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich.

On her return to Paris in 1984, she was a press officer, and then became a journalist and literary critic for *Psychologies Magazine*. Since 1992, de Rosnay has published twelve novels in French and three in English. She has also worked on the series *Family Affairs* for which she has written two episodes with the screenwriter Pierre-Yves Lebert.

In 2006 de Rosnay published her most popular novel, *Sarah's Key*. In 2009 the book was adapted into the French film *Sarah's Key* by Serge Joncour, with Kristin Scott Thomas as Julia.

Discussion starters

- 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?
- *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?
- 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?
- 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?
- What are the major themes of *Sarah's Key*?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- Why do modern readers enjoy novels about the past? How and when can a powerful piece of fiction be a history lesson in itself?
- 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?

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