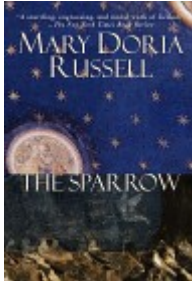




# Lambda Sci-Fi

## DC Area Gaylaxians



**The Sparrow**  
**By Mary Doria Russell**  
*Discussed January 1999*

### Discussion Questions

1. Is this a story about coming face-to-face with a sentient race that is so completely alien as to be incomprehensible, or about putting up a mirror to our own inner selves?
2. The Jesuits saw so many of their fellows martyred all over the world throughout exploratory history. Why aren't they more sympathetic in dealing with Father Emilio Sandoz - a man victimized by his faith?
3. Mary has stated that "I wanted readers to look philosophically at the idea that you can be seduced by the notion that God is leading you and that your actions have his approval."
  - a. What do you think she means by that?
  - b. In what way was Emilio Sandoz seduced by this notion?
4. Mary has also commented that the book is showing that as a Christian you can "do the right thing and still get screwed." That Catholics and Christians see a God of love and light - not the vicious and vengeful God portrayed in the Torah. How is this notion emphasized in the book?
5. How does Mary's looking backward at Christianity as someone who has converted to Judaism play into the story?
6. There are many Jesuits, but Sophia Mendes is the only member of the Jewish faith. And she is one of a very special subset, a Sephardic Jew. Why deliberately make her hostile to the main catholic character of the book?
  - a. What is she saying about Catholicism in this book?
7. One basic premise of the story is an evaluation of the harm that results from the explorer's inability to assess a culture from the threshold of exploration. Do you see any parallels between the Mission to Rakhat and the voyages of early historical explorers who inaccurately assessed the cultures they discovered? (Columbus, Cortez, etc.)
  - a. How would the Prime Directive from the Star Trek Universe have changed the outcome?

8.If, someday, we hear radio signals from another solar system, do you think an expedition would be mounted? Should be mounted?

a.Whom would you choose to go? Any Jesuits?

9.Is the trip to Rakhat a scientific or religious mission? Which was it ideologically supposed to be?

10.How do faith, love, and the role of God in the world drive the plot of the story?

11.The book has been called "a parable about faith - the search for God, in others, as well as 'out there.'" Do you agree? Why?

12.Mary has commented that she did not set out to write a science fiction piece - but that it came from a desire to test Jesuits, and modern man, in a first contact situation. To prove, perhaps that hindsight teaches us nothing. Does the setting suffer as a slave to the plot and the author's greater purpose?

a.Do scientific loopholes take away from the plot, or is the premise and prose strong enough to hold your attention?

b.Would a greater attention to the details of the setting have improved the book?

13.The book is also about family. Ironically enough - all of the main characters are childless, but have created a family of choice. How do the main characters relate in familial terms? Mother, brother, etc?

a.Are these chosen ties portrayed as stronger than genetic ones?

b.How does this relate to our communities own 'families of choice?'

14.The author has maintained that one character in the book was included to directly challenge her father's bigotry and homophobia. Is this why the character does not come 'out' until later in the book?

a.How effective is his un-stereotype? Is it too extreme?

15.The book tells a story by interweaving two time periods - that of actions on Rakhat and on Earth. Does this make the story more interesting?

a.Would the book have been as effective with everything told in chronological order?

b.Did the interweaving time periods make the book more difficult to read?

c.Is it reflective of Emilio's healing process?

16.Confession is good for the soul. Do you think Father Sandoz will ever recover?

17.What is her response to sapient suffering? How does she think that G-d interacts with his creatures who suffer? NB "But if you read Torah, you realize that G-d has a lot to answer for." And "If we act in accordance with our understanding of G-d's will, we ought to be rewarded. But in doing so we're making a deal that G-d didn't sign onto."

18.There is no gay sexual union here, except in the "whore house." DW is firmly celibate. Does the author belong to that species of liberal that is comfortable with only unsexed homosexuals?

19.Is she uncomfortable with the more flamboyant aspects of sexuality in general? Note that Marc, "the best therapeutic fuck in Quebec" is also celibate, having "come to see the error of his ways."

20.On the other hand, does she see DW as having the qualities necessary for forging together this unique family unit precisely because he is gay? Do gay men and lesbians love each other and their straight confreres in a unique emotional matrix?

21.Edward O. Wilson in On Human Nature makes the point that "Homosexuals may be the conservators of humanity's rare altruistic genes." And that they are utterly necessary for the functioning of human society. Is there an echo of this attitude here?

22.There seem to be parallels in contemporary and recent human history to what was done to Emilio: foot binding, female genital mutilation and destruction, the making of eunuchs, clothing which inhibits movement

and comfort and eliminates beauty and sexuality and makes its wearers clumsy and awkward. What is going on here? What is Emilio's mutilation a parable for?

23. Is Emilio a scapegoat for the fears and terrors of his brothers in his church and for the world as a whole? Why does humanity react with such loathing to his experience? Is there an echo here of "So persecuted they the prophets who were sent before me."? Walter Miller in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* would completely understand a world that scorned, stoned, and burned those who come, like Emilio, very close to the living G-d.

24. On the other hand, we have a real example of compassion and holiness in John Candotti. What traits of the human heart is John the trope for? Why is he the physician for Emilio's soul?

25. And what of Giuliani who says "But G-d didn't rape him." Is he the perfect believer? See especially the middle of page 401 and the story of G-d's withdrawal at creation.

26. I am baffled by her portrayal of prostitution. What is her point here? And why so often the truly horrible metaphor of G-d raping Emilio?