

Review of: “*The Sparrow*” and “*Children of God*”

Writer: Mary Doria Russell

Release Dates:

“*The Sparrow*:” 9/6/1996

“*Children of God*:” 9/1/1998

Audiobook Runtime:

“*The Sparrow*” - Roughly 16 hours.

“*Children of God*” - Roughly 18 hours.

**Major Spoilers Ahead;
You Have Been Warned...**

Plot of “*The Sparrow*:”

“*The Sparrow*” is the story of First Contact with an Alien race in the Alpha Centauri system by the Jesuit Priesthood. The story kicks off with a Jesuit priest, Emilio Sandoz, being the sole survivor of the first mission to the planet Ra’khat. The novel jumps between two timelines: one in the future, where Emilio returns to Earth in disgrace, and one in the past, detailing the mission's journey. Humanity makes first contact with extraterrestrial life when a radio signal featuring alien music is detected. The discovery is kept a secret to most of the world. The Jesuits, who, in a bid to extend their mission of seeking God in all “*Its*” creations, decide to mount an independent mission to Ra’khat. The crew includes a mix of scientists, priests, and a doctor who all are associated with the Jesuit order: Emilio Sandoz, the linguist and protagonist; Father D.W. Yarbrough, leader of the mission; Sofia Mendes, a brilliant but emotionally scarred computer expert; Anne and George Edwards, a married couple and both doctors; Jimmy Quinn, the engineer who discovered the signal; and Marc Robichaux, a young priest. They travel in a modified asteroid, sped up to near light-speed. As they land on Ra’khat, the mission initially seems like a resounding success. The crew encounters two intelligent species: the peaceful and Native American Indian-like, Runa and the more dominant, carnivorous and creators of the music, the Jana’ata. However, the humans' interactions with the Runa unintentionally lead to catastrophic cultural disruptions. Tensions rise as the crew realizes their naivety in understanding the complex social structures of Ra’khat. The climax of the novel is devastating. Emilio is subjected to severe physical, emotional, and sexual trauma, including multiple horrific gang rapes by the Jana’ata, leading to the deaths of his companions. The novel ends with Emilio's return to Earth, mentally, emotionally and religiously broken. He denounces his faith, as the Jesuit leadership interrogates him about the mission's failure. The first book portrays Alien first contact more like Star Trek the Original Series and Star Trek the Next Generation in relation to why the prime directive exists. Since this is humanity’s first meeting with intelligent life outside the solar system there is no prime directive nor is it even mentioned how humans could potentially destroy the balance of both the intelligent life on another planet and the ecosystem. “*The Sparrow*” ends with Emilio Sandoz’s confession of

being sold into slavery and used as a sex toy for the Jana'ata. The final spoilers of the book is learning that the songs the Jana'ata sang and were sent out into space were songs and poetry of their sexual conquests and gratification. **Porn...** SETI, intercepted alien porn and the Jesuits misunderstood this as music or communication from an alien race. That the Jana'ata rule over the Runa, control their food, their mating, bread them for obedience, food stock and sexual slavery. "*The Sparrow*" is a great example of how bad first contact with an alien species can go if language, art, spirituality are not properly understood in full context and a full language dissemination.

Plot of "*Children of God*:"

"*Children of God*" picks up where "*The Sparrow*" left off, with Emilio trying to rebuild his life. This time, the story dives deeper into the consequences of the first contact mission and that the Jesuit order has lost contact with the second mission that rescued Emilio. Emilio quits the Jesuit order, meets a woman, and begins a life of healing, growing and love. The order is planning on sending another mission back to Ra'khat. They attempt to persuade Emilio to go back. When he refuses he is beaten, kidnapped and drugged till the asteroid-ship is more than halfway into their trip despite his trauma, disabilities, and the relativistic time differences happening on the asteroid-ship to that of Earth. Back on Earth, the Catholic Church and other global powers are vying for control over the knowledge and resources of Ra'khat. The world now knows about alien life and Ra'khat. Upon his reluctant return to Ra'khat, Emilio discovers significant changes. The Runa, once oppressed, raped and eaten, have overthrown their Jana'ata rulers, leading to a chaotic power struggle. The Runa are not the passive victims they once appeared to be. They have evolved, and their actions against the Jana'ata raise moral and ethical questions about revenge and justice as they hunt the Jana'ata to starvation and near extinction. The climax of "*Children of God*" is both a resolution and a continuation of Emilio's spiritual journey. The heavy themes of redemption and the search for faith amidst suffering. Emilio's return to Ra'khat and subsequent involvement in the political and social upheavals there force him to confront his trauma and seek a new understanding of his faith and his place in the universe.

While both books are pretty good and tell a very interesting story about first alien contact they both have some plot holes that could get under some people's skin. The real strengths of the novels lies in their ability to evoke profound questions about the human condition and the existence of God in the face of unimaginable suffering and confusion. The pacing can be uneven at times, with some sections feeling overly detailed while others rush through crucial events and/or fail to properly explain major questions about events that happen in the story that are important but are either incomplete or ignored altogether. Additionally, the secondary characters, while well-developed, occasionally fall into stereotypes that detract from the novel's overall impact. The novel's ending, while satisfying in many ways, leaves too many unanswered questions for my liking, which may frustrate readers seeking a more definitive logical conclusion to the story and the characters.

Philosophical and Theological Exploration:

Russell's novels are rich with philosophical and theological reflections. The concept of 'The Veil of Ignorance' is evident as characters navigate their perceptions and knowledge, often realizing the limitations of their understanding. 'The Veil of Ignorance;' proposes that each person has a filter over their perception. A veil that separates us from the actual truth of reality and the truth a person or people will project onto the world and label that as truth. By passing through this 'Veil of Ignorance' we can expand our knowledge. The notion of "Set and Setting" is also crucial, highlighting how past experiences and environments influence present emotions and actions. 'Set and Setting' is a term used to describe how your mental state was influenced and impacted by important events that happen at certain locations. The set is how you felt and what you were thinking before the event happened and the setting is the environment or location where you were when said event happened. The idea is that if something good happened to you at a certain location returning to that location can reignite that pleasant feeling. It gives you a sense of comfort and security. This also can be in reverse where certain places can set off past traumas.

***"Nothing comforts anxiety like a little nostalgia." –
Morpheus, "Matrix Resurrections."***

Even though these books were written in the late 1990's they explore the dangers of Hyper-Reality, where in our present day social media and cultural narratives distort the perception of minority issues as majority concerns. This parallels the misunderstandings between humans and the Runa and Jana'ata cultures on Ra'khat, where superficial observations lead to devastating consequences. The novels draw on the resurrection myth of Osiris as well, linking Emilio's journey to a form of spiritual and emotional resurrection. Just as Isis reassembled her husband Osiris, Emilio seeks to piece together his shattered life, emotional state, humanity, faith and sense of self.

Parallels to Modern Media and Philosophical Thought:

"Everyone's scared of love dipshit... You learn that in your 20s. It takes a very rare, very powerful being to be terrified of happiness. Which is dumb. You're dumb. The smarter you are the more you know. Happiness is a trap. It can't last forever. Let's say you meet the love of your life. Well, it's still gonna end. It's inevitable. Whether by the slow pole of a disease, or the shock of loose footing on a hiking trail. Whether it be the corrosion of two personalities that reshape each other until they're incompatible. Or maybe the old stranger in a bar who says the things that need to be said to that person, that night. The point is happiness always ends. Best case scenario; think about this, best case is that you die at the same time. Yikes... In the larger picture of the Universe, you do not matter... Not one bit..." ~Paraphrased from "Rick and Morty," Season 7, Episode 10 – Fear Hole Rep that strangely resembles Rod Serling from the original "Twilight Zone" (1959–1964). This episode of Rick and Morty offers a cynical perspective on love and happiness, which is relevant when examining the profound suffering and fleeting moments of joy in Russell's novels. This

perspective mirrors Emilio's experiences where the brief moments of happiness on Earth after the failure of the first mission to Ra'khat are overshadowed by overwhelming trauma and loss. It raises questions about the nature of happiness and the inevitability of suffering.

Destructive-Nihilism is the loss of purpose...

Realizing that everything one believed to be true. All the paradigms and ideas were wrong for you. A person starts down a path of self-discovery. Destructive-Nihilism can lead that person who is experiencing a loss of purpose to want to destroy everything. Literally, EVERYTHING... An attack upon the fabric of reality itself. To wage war against the God or gods of creation itself. It is illogical to continue fighting because this point of view will never escape the control of the system it was created into. With the loss of purpose we desperately try to find something; *'that thing of which is lost,'* what is not understood is that once again that trapped sense of nothingness. Purpose is not assigned to us at birth. Purpose is something that we must strive to create for ourselves, in ourselves, from ourselves. Most will never understand that true purpose cannot be taken away because it's not something that is given. It's something that we make, we create within ourselves, for ourselves, from ourselves. What if that feeling you get in the pit of your gut during those times and things that feel ultimately and powerfully wrong and/or right could be just you from a different point of view of this reality itself. What if after everything there is nothing but just you in all the different points of view from a timeless frame of reference?

“There is no escaping reason. No denying purpose because as we both know without purpose we would not exist. It is purpose that created us. Purpose that connects us. Purpose that pulls us, that guides us, that drives us... It is purpose that defies the purpose, that binds us.” ~From Agent Smith’s point of view in the “Matrix Reloaded.”

The Matrix franchise almost always has a double reference about “*the one*” and how it presents us with the concept of what a messiah should be and how it can be used to manipulate us and not only from a religious point of view of believing that a savior would soon rescue US FROM EVIL. These savior-archetypes are used in politics where government leaders declare themselves as bringing salvation to the people. They appeal to the people's desire for a Messianic-figure with leadership and Authority which makes them easily manipulated and controlled. Biologically speaking, some people have tried to propose that humans have always looked for the alpha leader, the head of the herd. Humans are packed creatures. We often feel like we need leaders, even when we actually do not need to be led, but rather us leading our self or selves. The Messiah represents the ultimate leader. The one who would lead us to the Promised Land. The concept of the Messiah is a powerful force in the human psyche and corrupted leaders, politicians and psycho cults use it to manipulate millions of people around the world. The Matrix shares more with our reality than you ALL THINK. Check your religious, social, and political leaders; for they could be part of a system of control that has created a prison that you cannot see, touch, smell or feel.

A Prison for the Mind. A Prison for your Mind...

In 'Matrix Resurrections' the new Morpheus proceeds to ask Neo a question; "are memories turned into fiction any less real? Is reality based in memory and nothing but fiction?"

Memories turned into fiction have happened with historical people and events that have been turned into entertainment, movies, TV shows, books, video games. When adapting true historical events into fiction some details tend to change; thus memories are turned into fiction. History is turned into legend. An analysis exploring the realm of Hyper-Reality, particularly in the context of social media and influencer culture, there's an examination of how minority issues are many times portrayed as majority concerns, subsequently labeled as normal, everyday, '**FACTS.**' This phenomenon involves convincing the masses that something seemingly trivial is, in fact, widespread, considered a fact, and normal without undergoing critical scrutiny. Referencing Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser's "*Simulacra and Simulation*," the concept of Hyper-Reality is explored as a false reality existing above the real one. Morpheus's iconic line, '*Welcome to the desert of the real,*' takes on new significance, suggesting that even in a simulated life, an objective truth persists beyond the Matrix's deceit. This debate suggests that reality based on memory is inherently fictional, as it can never precisely replicate the original experience. Many people today find themselves trapped in this Hyper-Reality, navigating between '*Simulacra and Simulation.*' The analogy extends to the lives constructed on social media, where individuals utilize editing tools to exaggerate and modify their content, turning real experiences into Hyper-Real Simulations. The discussion underscores how edited representations of reality, fueled by attention, likes and hearts from social media, gradually replace genuine experiences with Hyper-Real versions. This shift has already occurred, with memories transforming into fiction and reality based on these memories becoming a simulation of what once was real. The analysis contemplates the profound impact of this Hyper-Reality within the modern-day internet landscape, where edited and exaggerated representations increasingly shape our collective understanding of reality. How do they end up crying poor and lying about the background with the entitled rage of young attention-seeking affluent classes having everything they could want so they have to pretend they are victims. It's the one thing they can't one-click buy from the Internet, but it's all tantrums they pretend to be a victim for attention and add exultation.

My Final Thoughts:

"*The Sparrow*" and "*Children of God*" are an interesting blend of profound explorations of faith, science-fiction, suffering, and the consequences of cultural encounters. Mary Doria Russell's storytelling is appealing, filled with emotional depth and philosophical questions. The characters are richly developed, with Emilio Sandoz standing out as one of the most compelling emotional character arcs I have seen in a minute. Sandoz's journey is upsetting and

deeply moving, making you question the nature of faith, God and humanity. Science-fiction and religion usually do not play well together in reality or fiction, but here; I feel like if one is a follower of faith or isn't, won't be offended here. I felt like the religious aspects here were done tastefully examining point of views of God either existing or not existing or if God exists is thoroughly bored by humanity's attempts to understand "it." The novels don't shy away from the brutal realities of first contact. The depiction of Emilio's trauma is raw and unflinching, forcing readers to confront the dark aspects of human, alien nature, spiritual and sexual torment. Russell's use of alternating timelines keeps the narrative suspenseful and engaging, allowing for a deep dive into the characters' psyches. Would love to see a 10-hour limited series run of this story, but done from a darker, almost horror point of view. Both books are must-reads for fans of thought-provoking science-fiction. They offer a unique blend of speculative fiction and theological inquiry, making you ponder long after you've either finished the series or listened to the audiobook versions, which is what I did here. A powerful statement of storytelling in exploring the deepest questions of spiritual existence.

“Religion... The wishful-thinking for apes that talk...”
~ Mary Doria Russell, Children of God

Review of: *“The Sparrow”* and *“Children of God”*
by David-Angelo Mineo
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