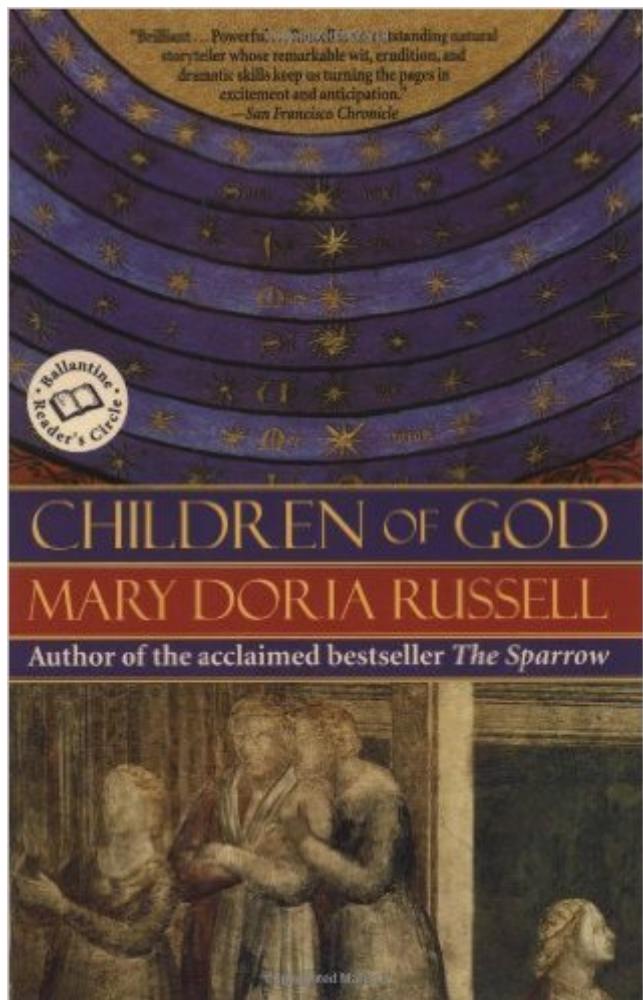


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Children Of God (Ballantine Reader's Circle)



Synopsis

Mary Doria Russell's debut novel, *The Sparrow*, took us on a journey to a distant planet and into the center of the human soul. A critically acclaimed bestseller, *The Sparrow* was chosen as one of Entertainment Weekly's Ten Best Books of the Year, a finalist for the Book-of-the-Month Club's First Fiction Prize and the winner of the James M. Tiptree Memorial Award. Now, in *Children of God*, Russell further establishes herself as one of the most innovative, entertaining and philosophically provocative novelists writing today. The only member of the original mission to the planet Rakhat to return to Earth, Father Emilio Sandoz has barely begun to recover from his ordeal when the Society of Jesus calls upon him for help in preparing for another mission to Alpha Centauri. Despite his objections and fear, he cannot escape his past or the future. Old friends, new discoveries and difficult questions await Emilio as he struggles for inner peace and understanding in a moral universe whose boundaries now extend beyond the solar system and whose future lies with children born in a faraway place. Strikingly original, richly plotted, replete with memorable characters and filled with humanity and humor, *Children of God* is an unforgettable and uplifting novel that is a potent successor to *The Sparrow* and a startlingly imaginative adventure for newcomers to Mary Doria Russell's special literary magic. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Like many readers, I found *The Sparrow* to be one of the most moving and exciting Science Fiction

books to come out in recent memory. I almost did not want to read the sequel because I was afraid that it was going to be a disappointment. While perhaps *Children of God* is not as original as *The Sparrow*, it is not (I am relieved to say) a disappointment. It picks up the themes that were explored so well in the first book and develops them in a number of new and satisfying ways. Rakhat is considerably more developed, as is the interspecies conflict between the Runa and the Jana'ata. As in the first book, Russell uses a sure and blessedly light hand to link the events on the two planets to the long-standing moral issues that have concerned humanity. There are weaknesses in the *Children of God* that are largely tied to the Earth side of the story. A few of the less necessary characters have the unfortunate feel that they exist simply to move the plot along. Since Russell uses so few clichés in her writing, it unfortunately hits a very sour note on the few occasions where her talent for writing character fails. It did not need stock bad guys or good guys to make it a success. The book also did not need the dramatic 'reward' offered at the end by Isaac and his discovery. The hand of God would have been clear enough in the unfolding events on Rakhat, and additional proof felt unnecessary. Not bad, but unnecessary. Properly speaking, this book would probably be rated four stars rather than five. However, there are so few writers working with this level of inventiveness. For that reason, and for the strength of the two books taken together, I am rating it as five stars.

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* was one of the best SF books of 1996 and a remarkable first novel. That novel, which involved first contact with aliens living on the planet Rakhat (orbiting Alpha Cetauri) worked well on a number of levels. It told a good story, had interesting characters, creating a fascinating alien civilization, and explored some interesting philosophical issues. The ending of the book left me stunned and nearly in tears. I was thus rather worried when I heard that Russell was at work on a sequel. I wasn't convinced that the book needed a sequel and wasn't sure that any sequel could live up to *The Sparrow*. *Children of God* isn't quite as good as *The Sparrow*. However, although it doesn't have quite the impact of the original, it is still a fine novel in its own right. The book interweaves two stories: the story of Emilio Sandoz and his return to Rakhat and the story of what happened on Rakhat after the original Jesuit mission failed and Sandoz was sent back to earth. The two stories together continue and in many ways complete much of the story of *The Sparrow*, in a way that makes the book feel like a natural, almost essential sequel. On Rakhat, war has broken out. The Runa, the herbivore species that were both the servants and the food of the planet's other intelligent species, the Jana'ata, have risen up against their former masters. At the same time, Jana'ata society itself is undergoing great changes, in fact is undergoing a mostly

progressive social revolution, lead by the same Jana'ata who was the source of Emilio's brutalization in *The Sparrow*. Russell does a very good job here of not giving us good guys and bad guys in this struggle. In fact, she even sheds some new light on some things that happened in the previous book, making us look again at why characters did some of the things they did. Both alien species have their good and their bad, and both in their way are trapped by their genes. Catalyzing the whole revolution are Sophia (a human left behind for dead from the first mission), her autistic son Isaac, the Jana'ata merchant Supaari (now an outcast) and his daughter. Much of what happens in the book comes from these four characters and the ways they each attempt to come to grips with the Runa/Jana'ata problem. At the same time, on earth, Emilio continues to recover from the devastating events of *The Sparrow*, while the Church tries to convince him to go back to Rakhat, both to help the Church and for the sake of his own soul. Emilio, they feel, can only come to understand what happened to him -- events that have shaken his beliefs -- if he goes back to discover the results of these events. Of course, he does wind up going back, and the new party becomes a crucial part of the resolution on Rakhat. As a side note, on thing I particularly liked is that, early in *Children of God*, Russell had the General of the Jesuits essentially produce a short summary of what happened to the first expedition. It was a very nice way of summing up the first novel in a page and a half. Too many writers assume that everyone remembers all the details of a book they read two years earlier. I often don't remember some details, and thus I liked having the short reminder. If the book isn't quite as good as *The Sparrow*, this stems in large part from the fact that the story of Rakhat, while well done and rather interesting, is not as interesting as the story of Emilio and his companions. I would at times, while reading about the Jana'ata, really want to get back to Emilio and his companions. They're well drawn and interesting characters and was anxious to find out what would happen to them. In the end, the book remained satisfying. The ending was strong, and the characters remained interesting to the end. The book will certainly be on my Hugo nominations list next year. (Russell was also on my Campbell nominating ballot this year. I hope she makes it.)

It's almost not fair to think of *The Sparrow* and *Children* as two separate novels, since their plots tie in so closely and could just as easily be combined into one coherent book. That being said, *Children* is everything *The Sparrow* (Also a 5 star book in my opinion) was, and a little more in some places! There is much more background on Rakhati history and culture given here, which certainly helped me make sense of a few lingering questions I had from *The Sparrow* (which I'll be reading again in a month or two, of course!) Many questions left open about the characters of *The*

Sparrow(particularly Emilio Sandoz) are also answered, which leads to a better understanding of the storyline of both books, although Children won't be nearly as an enjoyable or understandable to someone who hasn't read The Sparrow.I highly recommend this novel to anyone who read The Sparrow and enjoyed it, and I recommend the Sparrow followed by Children of God to anyone looking for an engrossing novel on spirituality, religion, and what it all means.

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