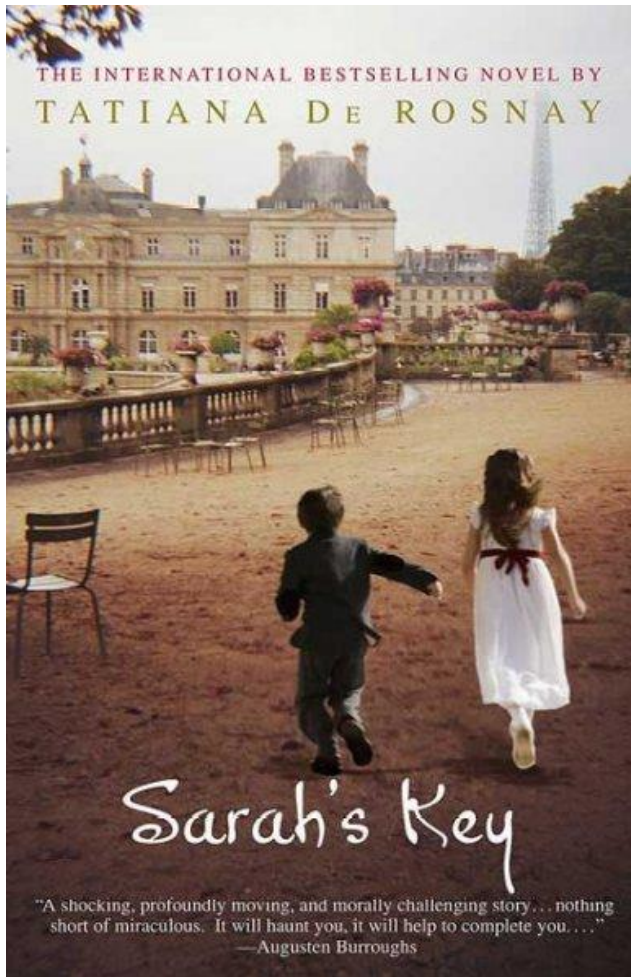


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1345744>

### About the Book



Paris, July 1942: Sarah, a ten year-old girl, is brutally arrested with her family by the French police in the Vél d'Hiv roundup, but not before she locks her younger brother in a cupboard in the family's apartment, thinking that she will be back within a few hours.

Paris, May 2002: On Vél d'Hiv's 60th anniversary, journalist Julia Jarmond is asked to write an article about this black day in France's past. Through her contemporary investigation, she stumbles onto a trail of long-hidden family secrets that connect her to Sarah. Julia finds herself compelled to retrace the girl's ordeal, from that terrible term in the Vel d'Hiv', to the camps, and beyond. As she probes into Sarah's past, she begins to question her own place in France, and to reevaluate her marriage and her life.

Tatiana de Rosnay offers us a brilliantly subtle, compelling portrait of France under occupation and reveals

## About the Author



TATIANA DE ROSNAY was born in the suburbs of Paris and is of English, French and Russian descent. She is the author of nine French novels. She also writes for French *ELLE*, and is a literary critic for *Psychologies* magazine. Tatiana de Rosnay is married and has two children. *SARAH'S KEY* is her first novel written in her mother tongue, English.

Source:

<http://www.readinggroupgold.com/product/rggpage.aspx?isbn=0312370849>

Q: What was the inspiration for *Sarah's Key*?

A: I have always been interested in places and houses. And how places and houses keep memories, how walls can talk. I was browsing on the Internet about places in Paris where dark deeds had happened, and fell upon a website describing the rue Nélaton, in the 15th arrondissement, not far from where I live. That was where the great Vél d'Hiv roundup took place on July 16th 1942.

Q: How much did you know about what happened before you started writing?

A: I realized I didn't know much about what exactly happened that day. I was not taught about this event at school, during the 70's. And it still seemed to be shrouded by some kind of taboo. So I started reading and researching.

Q: And what did you learn? How did it make you feel?

A: As I progressed through my research, I was moved, appalled by what I discovered concerning the Vél d'Hiv roundup, especially about what happened to those 4000 Jewish children, and I knew I had to write about it. I needed to write about it. But I also knew it could not be a historical novel, it had to have a more contemporary feel to it. And that's how I imagined Julia's story taking place today, linked to Sarah's, back in the 40's.

Q: Please share a few words about the writing process.

A: Writing *Sarah's Key* has been a powerful experience. First of all, reverting to my mother tongue after years of writing novels in French felt exhilarating. Like

coming home after a long trip. Secondly, researching those dark times of France's past, the Occupation, the Vichy years, was tremendously enriching. But sobering, too.

Writing *Sarah's Key* took me to Drancy and Beaune La Rolande, places around Paris which have a dreaded past that cannot be forgotten despite time going by. My visits there were poignant and memorable. And it was also through this book that I met Heloïse d'Ormesson and Gilles Cohen-Solal, my French publishers, who hold world rights to the novel, and whose enthusiasm concerning *Sarah's Key*—and me—have added a whole lot of excitement to my career as a writer.

Q: Speaking of your writing career, who are some of your favorite authors?

A: I admire Daphne du Maurier, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Irène Nemirovsky, Emile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allen Poe. And Paul Auster, Joanna Trollope, Anita Shreeve, Penelope Lively, A.S Byatt, JM Coetzee, Maggie O'Farrell, Tracy Chevalier, Joyce Carol Oates, and Sarah Waters.

## Reviews

### *Library Journal* \*Starred Review\*

Pivotal to this novel is the key in ten-year-old Sarah's pocket. It opens the cupboard in which she has hidden her younger brother from the French police, who are rounding up Jews in Paris. It is July 16, 1942, and Sarah, along with her parents and hundreds more people, are brought to the stadium Vlodrome d'Hiver, where they spend several days without food or water before being sent to French camps en route to Auschwitz. Arriving at the camp Beaune-la-Rolande, Sarah is separated from her parents and manages to escape. Nearby farmers not only protect but eventually adopt her. In alternating chapters, we read of American-born journalist Julia Jarmond, who's working on a magazine story about the "Vél d'Hiv" roundup on its 60th anniversary. Because the grandparents of Julia's husband moved into the apartment once owned by Sarah's family, we learn what Sarah discovers when she finally returns ten years later with the key - knowledge so traumatic that it changes Julia's life forever. This debut by French-born de Rosnay has been translated into 15 languages and will surely be an international best seller. Masterly and compelling, it is not something that readers will quickly forget. Highly recommended.

### *Publishers Weekly* \*Starred Review\*

De Rosnay's U.S. debut fictionalizes the 1942 Paris roundups and deportations, in which thousands of Jewish families were arrested, held at the Vlodrome d'Hiver outside the city, then transported to Auschwitz. Forty-five-year-old Julia Jarmond, American by birth, moved to Paris when she was 20 and is married to the arrogant, unfaithful Bertrand Tzac, with whom she has an 11-year-old daughter. Julia writes for an American magazine and her editor assigns her to cover the 60th anniversary of the Vél 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 10-year-old Sarah and four-year-old 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. Already translated into 15 languages, the novel is De Rosnay's 10th (but her first written in English, her first language). It beautifully conveys Julia's conflicting loyalties, and makes Sarah's trials so riveting, her innocence so absorbing, that the book is hard to put down.

## Discussion Questions

1. 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?
2. *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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. What are the major themes of *Sarah's Key*?
6. 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?

**7.** 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?

**8.** 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?

**9.** 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?

**10.** 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?

**11.** Why do modern readers enjoy novels about the past? How and when can a powerful piece of fiction be a history lesson in itself?

**12.** 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?

## **Multimedia**

### ***Tatiana De Rosnay 'Sarah's Key' (Video Clip)***

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy0Inc76RaQ>

A discussion with the author.

### ***Sarah's Key (Movie)***

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395006>;

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395020>

(Call number: DVD Drama Sarah's; Blu-ray Drama Sarah's)

In modern-day Paris, a journalist finds her life becoming entwined with a young girl whose family was torn apart during the notorious Vel d'Hiv round up, which took place in Paris in 1942. She stumbles upon a family secret which will link her forever to the destiny of a young Jewish girl, Sarah.

## Further Reading

***The House I Loved*** by Tatiana de Rosnay

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395433>

(Call number: Fiction Rosnay)

Paris, France: 1860's. Hundreds of houses are being razed, whole neighborhoods reduced to ashes. By order of Emperor Napoleon III, Baron Haussman has set into motion a series of large-scale renovations that will permanently alter the face of old Paris, moulding it into a "modern city." The reforms will erase generations of history—but in the midst of the tumult, one woman will take a stand.

***A Secret Kept*** by Tatiana de Rosnay

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1363852>

(Call number: Fiction Rosnay)

This stunning new novel from Tatiana de Rosnay, author of the acclaimed New York Times bestseller *Sarah's Key*, plumbs the depths of complex family relationships and the power of a past secret to change everything in the present. It all began with a simple seaside vacation, a brother and sister recapturing their childhood. Antoine Rey thought he had the perfect surprise for his sister Melanie's birthday: a weekend by the sea at Noirmoutier Island, where the pair spent many happy childhood summers playing on the beach. It had been too long, Antoine thought, since they'd returned to the island - over thirty years, since their mother died and the family holidays ceased. But the island's haunting beauty triggers more than happy memories; it reminds Melanie of something unexpected and deeply disturbing about their last island summer. When, on the drive home to Paris, she finally summons the courage to reveal what she knows to Antoine, her emotions overcome her and she loses control of the car. Recovering from the accident in a nearby hospital, Melanie tries to recall what caused her to crash. Antoine encounters an unexpected ally: sexy, streetwise Angele, a mortician who will teach him new meanings for the words life, love and death. Suddenly, however, the past comes swinging back at both siblings, burdened with a dark truth about their mother, Clarisse. Trapped in the wake of a shocking family secret shrouded by taboo, Antoine must confront his past and also his troubled relationships with his own children. How well does he really know his mother, his children, even himself? Suddenly fragile on all fronts as a son, a husband, a brother and a father, Antoine Rey will learn the truth about his family and himself the hard way. By turns thrilling, seductive and destructive, with a lingering effect that is bittersweet and redeeming, *A Secret Kept* is the story of a modern family, the invisible ties that hold it together, and the impact it has throughout life.

### **Author's official website**

<http://www.tatianaderosnay.com/>

News, biography, and resources; primarily in French.

### **Read-Alikes**

#### ***Charlotte Gray* by Sebastian Faulks**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146288>

(Call number: Fiction Faulks)

From the bestselling author of *Birdsong* comes *Charlotte Gray*, the remarkable story of a young Scottish woman who becomes caught up in the effort to liberate Occupied France from the Nazis while pursuing a perilous mission of her own. In blacked-out, wartime London, Charlotte Gray develops a dangerous passion for a battle-weary RAF pilot, and when he fails to return from a daring flight into France she is determined to find him. In the service of the Resistance, she travels to the village of Lavaurette, dyeing her hair and changing her name to conceal her identity. Here she will come face-to-face with the harrowing truth of what took place during Europe's darkest years, and will confront a terrifying secret that threatens to cast its shadow over the remainder of her days. Vividly rendered, tremendously moving, and with a narrative sweep and power reminiscent of his novel *Birdsong*, *Charlotte Gray* confirms Sebastian Faulks as one of the finest novelists working today.

#### ***Resistance* by Anita Shreve**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1097380>

(Call number: Fiction Shreve)

This tale of impossible love--told with the same narrative grace and keen eye for human emotion that have distinguished all of Anita Shreve's cherished bestsellers--leads us into a harrowing world where forbidden passions have catastrophic consequences. In a Nazi-occupied Belgian village, Claire Daussois, the wife of a resistance worker, shelters a wounded American bomber pilot in a secret attic hideaway. As she nurses him back to health, Claire is drawn into an affair that seems strong enough to conquer all--until the brutal realities of war intrude, shattering every idea she ever had about love, trust, and betrayal.

#### ***The Sixth Lamentation* by William Brodrick**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209367>

(Call number: Fiction Brodrick)

Larkwood Priory, England: Father Anselm is stopped by an old man. What, he is asked, should a man do when the world has turned against him? Anselm's response: claim sanctuary. But the answer sets off more trouble than he ever

could have imagined when the man returns, demanding the protection of the Church. He is Eduard Schwermann, a suspected Nazi war criminal. Agnes Aubret has unburdened a secret to her granddaughter Lucy. Fifty years earlier, Agnes was in occupied Paris, risking her life to smuggle Jewish children to safety-until her group was exposed by an SS officer: Eduard Schwermann. Not only has the Church granted Schwermann sanctuary before; in 1944 it helped him escape from France to begin a new life in Britain. As Anselm attempts to find out why and as Lucy delves deeper into her grandmother's past, their investigations dovetail to form a remarkable story. William Brodrick makes a dazzling debut in this literary thriller where two seemingly unconnected lives gradually, shockingly converge. Brodrick, himself a former Augustinian friar, is a master of precision plotting, morally complex characterization, and crisp historical re-creation. In *Father Anselm*, Brodrick has crafted a unique and compelling hero. And *The 6th Lamentation* promises to be the literary thriller discovery of the season.

**\*Book Club To Go!\*** *Suite Française* by Irène Némirovsky

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308868>

(Call number: Fiction Némirovsky)

By the early 1940s, when Ukrainian-born Irène Némirovsky began working on what would become *Suite Française* --the first two parts of a planned five-part novel--she was already a highly successful writer living in Paris. But she was also a Jew, and in 1942 she was arrested and deported to Auschwitz: a month later she was dead at the age of thirty-nine. Two years earlier, living in a small village in central France--where she, her husband, and their two small daughters had fled in a vain attempt to elude the Nazis -- she'd begun her novel, a luminous portrayal of a human drama in which she herself would become a victim. When she was arrested, she had completed two parts of the epic, the handwritten manuscripts of which were hidden in a suitcase that her daughters would take with them into hiding and eventually into freedom. Sixty-four years later, at long last, we can read Némirovsky's literary masterpiece. The first part, "A Storm in June," opens in the chaos of the massive 1940 exodus from Paris on the eve of the Nazi invasion during which several families and individuals are thrown together under circumstances beyond their control. They share nothing but the harsh demands of survival--some trying to maintain lives of privilege, others struggling simply to preserve their lives--but soon, all together, they will be forced to face the awful exigencies of physical and emotional displacement, and the annihilation of the world they know. In the second part, "Dolce," we enter the increasingly complex life of a German-occupied provincial village. Coexisting uneasily with the soldiers billeted among them, the villagers--from aristocrats to shopkeepers to peasants--cope as best they can. Some choose resistance, others collaboration, and as their community

is transformed by these acts, the lives of these these men and women reveal nothing less than the very essence of humanity. *Suite Française* is a singularly piercing evocation--at once subtle and severe, deeply compassionate and fiercely ironic--of life and death in occupied France, and a brilliant, profoundly moving work of art.

