Southfield Public Library

Sarah’s Key by Tatiana de Rosnay
Discussion questions used at SPL July -- 2011

1. Were you aware of this happening in France during WWII? Did it make you go do any research?

2. What did you think was going to happen when her brother hid in the room? What did you think of her parent’s reactions to what was happening? What about Sarah’s when she realized what was going to happen to her brother?

3. What did you think when her father made his choice to stay with her and her mother, rather than try to escape and save her brother?

4. Even though the reader knows she is Sarah, why do you think she was nameless in the book for so long?

5. Here’s another story told in two different times. . . Did she do a good job in blending them? Were her voices distinct? Who was the more interesting character to you? Julia or Sarah?

6. On p. 77, the girl wondered if her parents were right in keeping things from her. Were they? What about further along in the book, when Julia was keeping things from her daughter, Zoe?

7. Did it hold its believability for you?

8. Some reviews commented unfavorably on her writing but others liked it. Where do you fall? Do you think any problems lay in the translation from French to English?

9. Did you like how the apartment itself played a role in the story?

10. At the beginning, how did you think the family who lives there now was involved in the horrors of the Holocaust?

11. What did you think of the relationship between Julia and her husband, Bertrand? Did you see love between them? Did you understand her attraction to him? Why was he so adamant about not having another child? Did that seem forced to you? Did you expect the divorce?

12. What about her relationship with his family? Was it warm and fuzzy or just cool?

13. Why do you think she was able to leave her home in the US and stay in France for so long? Did the author make that decision making/attraction viable to you?

14. In Jewish culture, it is extremely important that the world does not forget the Holocaust. Do you think this is why the author wrote the book?
15. In Sarah’s world, who will remember her? How important was it to Julia that she be remembered? How important is that anyone is remembered?

16. Were you surprised at Sarah’s adult life? Were her actions believable to you?

17. Was it a bit much with Julia naming her daughter Sarah? What do you think that symbolized?

18. To me, grief was a big theme of this book . . . Sarah grieving for her family, for her actions and Julia grieving for the death of her marriage . . . who else was grieving in this book? What were some other major themes in this story? What about guilt? Who felt it? Who didn’t and should have?

19. Who kept the most secrets in this book? When they were told, did it help or did it hurt? Are we very good at keeping secrets?

20. How do you think Sarah’s son, William, took the news of his mother’s life? Why did she keep it a secret from him? Did it make sense to you that Sarah never spoke of her past? That in fact, she hid her heritage in the US when it could have been safe to admit who she was?

21. Did Julia have the right to tell William about his mother’s past? Would you want someone to bring you such information?

22. Was she reckless about her pregnancy? Why did she ignore those warning signs?

23. Why was she compelled to go immediately to Italy to find William? P. 380

24. At the end, when Bertrand’s family finally knew the story, they were divided into two camps . . . Those who thought Julia was wrong in telling William and those who thought she was right . . . which side would you be on? P. 436

25. Did you notice again at the end that the baby was not mentioned by name, just called the toddler, my daughter, etc.? Did you guess what her name would be? Did that annoy you?

26. Did you like how the book ended with Julia and William meeting again in Italy? Forced? Or a much needed happy ending possibility?

27. There was much silence in France for many years about the French collaboration with the Nazis and with sending their own people to the camps, but I think every country has episodes that they should be ashamed of. How do you think as a nation, people deal with that? Here in the U.S. with our Jim Crow laws, Japan with their actions during WWI, the Germans over their Nazi grandparents. . .

28. On p. 282 it is talked about how people close their eyes . . . Can we as a culture change that? Have you seen recent examples of it?

29. By talking about such things, does healing start? Is a shared guilt easier to deal with?
30. The author is French born in 1961 but lived in Boston when her father taught at MIT, then lived in England and returned to France in 1984. Do you think she got the American part of Julia right?

31. This book was full of disturbing moments . . . What were some of the worst for you? People living in the apartments that were a holding camp? Poor Rachel being taken back to the camp? Michel left in the cupboard?

32. On many French monuments, the Jews were described as victims of Nazis. Would you agree with that or were they victims of the French?

33. Are there things in history that you didn’t know and shocked you, like Vel D’hui shocked Julia?

34. What do you think will happen to William and Julia? Will they get together? Was it too sappy of an ending?

35. Would this be a good book for high school/college students to read and discuss? Is it easier learning history via a novel rather than non-fiction?
Photos of places in Sarah’s Key

Drancy
The French Republic, in remembrance of racist and anti-Semitic crimes and crimes against humanity committed with the authority given to them by the government of the French state. 1940-1944,

We will never forget.
Vel D’Hiv
General Discussion Questions

• For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?

• How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?

• How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?

• How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?

• Did the book hold your interest?

• How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?

• Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?

• Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?
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 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? (Questions issued by publisher.)