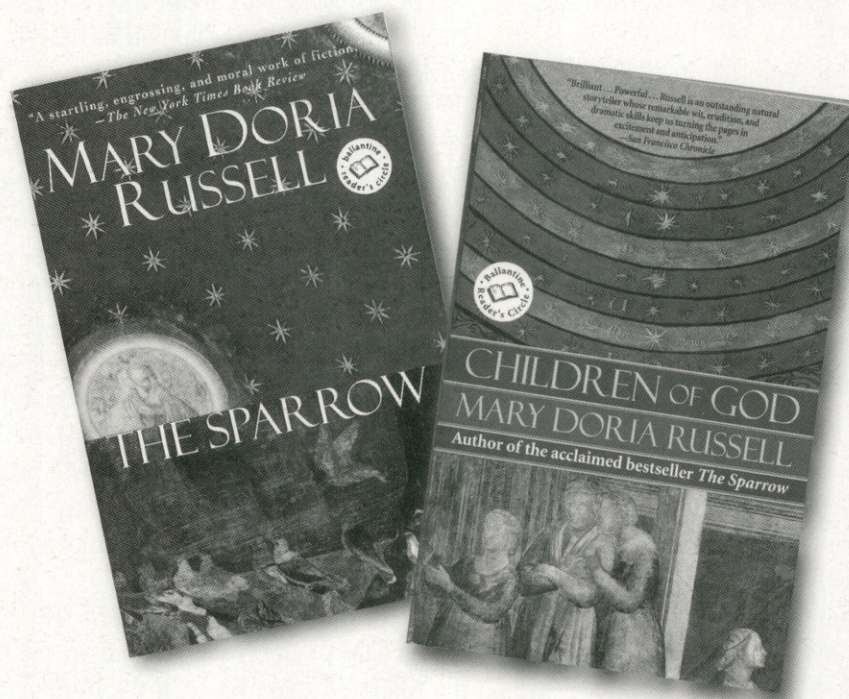


A Soul Looking for God

A Synopsis of *The Sparrow*



by Norman L. Wendth

The *Sparrow* opens in December 2059 and closes in August 2060. During those nine months, a team of Jesuits work to understand—and perhaps heal—Emilio Sandoz, priest, linguist, and sole survivor of a missionary expedition to the planet Rakhat. Sandoz has returned to Earth a broken man, his hands destroyed by some little understood ritual on Rakhat, his soul destroyed by the loss of the

rest of the expedition and by experiences that he is having great trouble processing. Sandoz doesn't want the team's help, however; he refuses to tell even the bare facts of his story and responds violently when others try to talk about what happened to him. He resigns from the Jesuits.

The team must continue to try to work with Sandoz, however, and not only because they wish to heal a fellow Jesuit. The trading expedition that followed the Jesuits to Rakhat and brought Sandoz back to Earth has accused the priest of a variety of scandalous behaviors including prostitution and murder, and the press is whipping up a public frenzy. Perhaps most importantly, the Jesuits are preparing another mission, and obviously need to understand why the first expedition failed in order to better prepare the second.

The Jesuit team—and the novel's readers—do not understand what has happened to Emilio Sandoz until the last chapter of the novel. Even while we follow the steps of Sandoz's recovery, however, his story unfolds in a series of flashbacks that reveal not only the roots of his own trauma, but also the stories of others on the first expedition.

The novel's main action begins in 2019, when astronomer Jimmy Quinn records a radio signal that turns out to be a musical broadcast coming from a planet near Alpha Centauri, a mere 4.3 light years from Earth. While the United Nations debates endlessly, the Society of Jesus secretly mounts a mission to the music's source. The society retrofits a mining asteroid, christens it the *Stella Maris*, and sends a company of eight, including Quinn and Sandoz, on a seventeen-year voyage "to learn, not to proselytize."

Rakhat turns out to be a planet of many surprises, starting with a breathable atmosphere. Despite that hospitable happenstance, one member of the mission dies mysteriously within the first few days, and, although the cause is apparently environmental, Anne Edwards, the team physician, never can learn why the death happened. Three suns, exotic vegetation, and many other planetary details are carefully and precisely presented, and although colorful, they are somewhat expected "surprises."

Much more important to the novel is the genuine surprise that two very different intelligent species

have evolved on one planet. Initial contact is made with the Runa, a pastoral, highly social people who accept humans as potential trading partners. Runa assign children, with their natural language-learning ability, to new cultures to be able to communicate as quickly as possible; Askama is the Runa child assigned to learn from and teach Sandoz. Back on earth, the Contact Consortium will accuse Sandoz of her murder.

The other species on Rakhat are the Jana'ata. The Jana'ata are a fierce, carnivorous species with a complex, rich, and subtle culture filled with both political intrigue and exquisite art. They are the dominant species on Rakhat. After Sandoz has learned enough of the Runa language to communicate, he meets Supaari VaGayjur, the Jana'ata trader who controls the territory in which the Jesuits have landed. Many Earth items, especially aromatics, would clearly be treasures worth extremely high prices in Jana'ata cities, and Supaari is quick to capitalize on his good fortune. Through Supaari the mission enters the VaRakhati cities and eventually meets the great poet Hlavin Kitheri, the Jana'ata Paramount whose songs brought the Jesuit expedition from Earth in the first place.

Russell ends her prologue "They meant no harm." However, just as the less altruistic Europeans entering the "new" world in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Jesuits cannot avoid doing harm. They know and discuss the possibility going in and hope to avoid the worst problems, but despite their efforts mistakes are inevitable, and all the sadder because the VaRakhati societies are so beautiful and the novel shares so many moments of pure joy.

It would be unfair to those who have not yet read *The Sparrow* (or its sequel *Children of God*) for us to reveal the way they hurt most the ones they love most and upset the balance of power between the Runa and the Jana'ata. But when all is said and done the mission is destroyed, many on Rakhat are dead, and Emilio Sandoz returns to Earth highly damaged, questioning God, and under what amounts to house arrest.

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