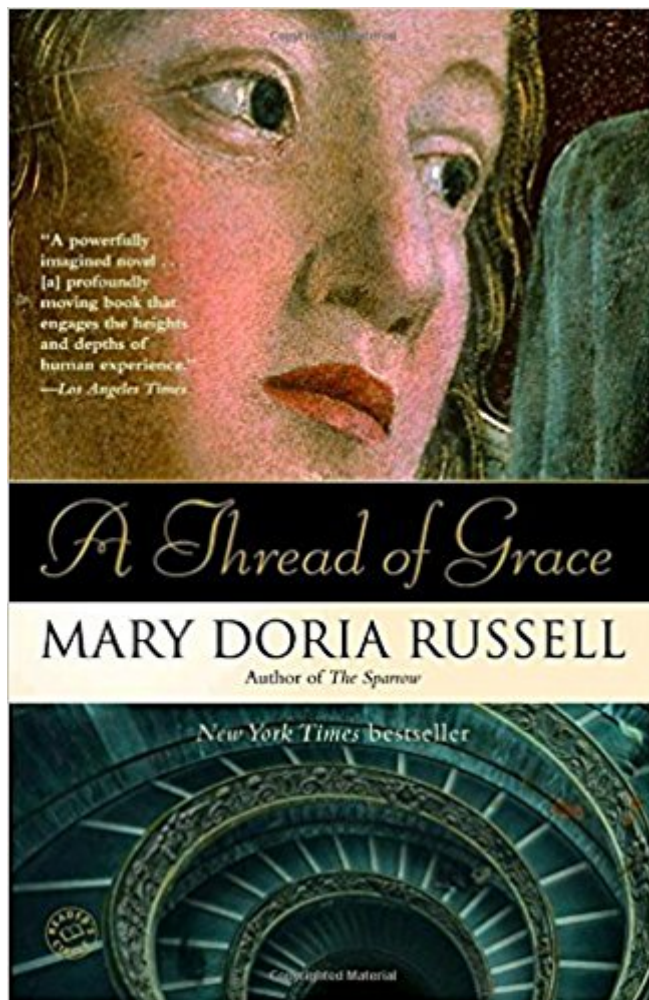


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# A Thread Of Grace



## Synopsis

Set in Italy during the dramatic finale of World War II, this new novel is the first in seven years by the bestselling author of *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*. It is September 8, 1943, and fourteen-year-old Claudette Blum is learning Italian with a suitcase in her hand. She and her father are among the thousands of Jewish refugees scrambling over the Alps toward Italy, where they hope to be safe at last, now that the Italians have broken with Germany and made a separate peace with the Allies. The Blums will soon discover that Italy is anything but peaceful, as it becomes overnight an open battleground among the Nazis, the Allies, resistance fighters, Jews in hiding, and ordinary Italian civilians trying to survive. Mary Doria Russell sets her first historical novel against this dramatic background, tracing the lives of a handful of fascinating characters. Through them, she tells the little-known but true story of the network of Italian citizens who saved the lives of forty-three thousand Jews during the war's final phase. The result of five years of meticulous research, *A Thread of Grace* is an ambitious, engrossing novel of ideas, history, and marvelous characters that will please Russell's many fans and earn her even more. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mary Doria Russell's extraordinary and complex historical novel, *A Thread of Grace*, is the kind of book that you will find yourself haunted by long after finishing the last page. It opens with a group of Jewish refugees being escorted to safe-keeping by Italian soldiers. After making the arduous journey over a steep mountain pass, they are welcomed into a small village with warm food and

clean beds. They have barely laid their heads to rest when news is received that Mussolini has just surrendered Italy to Hitler, putting them in danger yet again. This opening sequence is a grim foreshadowing of the heart-breaking journey these characters will experience in their struggle for survival. The rich fictional narrative is woven through the factual military maneuvers and political games at the end of WW II, sharing a little-known story of a group of Italian citizens that sheltered more than 40,000 Jews from grueling work camp executions. Rather than the bleak and hopeless feeling that might be expected, the novel has the opposite effect; it reminds us that just as there will always be war, crime, and death, so too will there be good people who selflessly sacrifice themselves to ease the suffering of others. Perhaps best of all, Russell succinctly opens and closes her writing with short pieces that bookend the story with the force of a freight train. Her moving finale wraps up her narrative in the present day, with a death bed scene that's sure to rip the heart out of readers of every faith and ancestry. On the surface, Russell's third novel may seem quite different from her earlier works. Both *The Sparrow* and its sequel, *Children of God*, were futuristic stories about Earth's first contact with alien life forms, but a closer look reveals several similarities. Fans of her earlier books will be pleased to find that Emilio Sandoz, the charismatic Jesuit priest from the first two books, finds new life in Renzo Leoni--*A Thread of Grace's* charming and haunted chameleon. The two have different circumstances and histories, but both characters are made of the same cloth--tormented by their consciences and plagued by unrequited love. Also similar to her earlier books, the characters in *A Thread of Grace* don't all enjoy a happy ending. A note in the reader's guide tells us that Russell flipped a coin to determine the fate of some of the characters. This may be upsetting for many readers, particularly those used to Hollywood endings, but it does serve as a frank reminder of the arbitrary nature of war and death. --Victoria Griffith --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Starred Review. Busy, noisy and heartfelt, this sprawling novel by Russell is a striking departure from her previous two acclaimed SF thrillers, *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*—chronicles the Italian resistance to the Germans during the last two years of WWII. Three cultures mingle uneasily in Porto Sant'Andrea on the Ligurian coast of northwest Italy—the Italian Jews of the village, headed by the chief rabbi Iacopo Soncini; the Italian Catholics, like Sant'Andrea's priest Don Osvaldo Tomitz, who befriend and shelter the Jews; and the occupying Germans invited by Mussolini's crumbling regime. In the last camp is the drunken, tubercular Nazi deserter, Doktor Schramm, a broken man who confesses to Don Osvaldo that while working in state hospitals and Auschwitz, he was responsible for murdering 91,867 people.

Meanwhile, Jewish refugees in southern France, including Albert Blum and his teenage daughter, Claudette, are fleeing across the Alps to Italy, hoping to find sanctuary there. Russell pursues numerous narrative threads, including the Blums' perilous flight over the mountains; Italian Jew Renzo Leoni's personal coming to terms with his participation in the Dolo hospital bombing during the Abyssinian campaign in 1935; the dangerous frenzy of the Italian partisans; and the bloody-mindedness of German officers resolved to carry out Hitler's murderous racial policy despite mounting evidence of its futility. The action moves swiftly, with impressive authority, jostling dialogue, vibrant personalities and meticulous, unexpected historical detail. The intensity and intimacy of Russell's storytelling, her sharp character writing and fierce sense of humor bring fresh immediacy to this riveting WWII saga. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Just when I thought I knew almost all about WWII.....this book was a revelation to me on so many different levels. While I was aware that the Pope had hardly covered himself with glory where the Jews in Europe during WWII were concerned, I knew nothing about the part many of the Italian people played in hiding the thousands of displaced Jews pouring into Italy across the Alps from France, Poland, Germany, etc., to escape falling into the hands of the Nazis. Uninformed, uneducated Italian villagers, who knew only that they hated the Germans and governments in general, put their lives and the lives of family and friends on the line to hide these escaping Jews. The inhabitants of tiny villages, so isolated in the mountains that they were living an almost medieval existence, took the powerless Jews under their protection. They did this almost instinctively, in an almost matter-of-fact way. Their's was the human response to the plight of other humans. They hid them, fed them, clothed them and found the resistance groups hidden in these mountains who would see they were not discovered in the Germans relentless pursuit of the fleeing Jews, all part of Hitler's crazed focus on a Jew-free world.

I came to this Maria Doria Russell novel with the experience of two of her other novels, *Children of God* and the sequel. A convert to Judaism of Italian background, Russell brings her heritage and faith to bear on a story that is both moving and intricately plotted. She tells the story of Italian Jews hiding, and fighting back, under the late-World War II German occupation of northern Italy. Her research is solid, her voice trustworthy. Her style is poetic and moving.

Never knew about this particular part of WWII. Never knew what part Italy played in the whole

scheme of things. But I am happy and pleased to know that there was a country, in the world, that welcomed, fought for, and protected the Jewish population and refugees that were in, and came to Italy during the Second World War. I highly recommend this book! Excellent storytelling, excellent story.

I discovered MDR's writing when I somehow stumbled across "Doc" a while ago and really loved it - the story, the authenticity she brings to it, the dialogue, the humour, the characters, all of it. The next of hers I read was "Epitaph", more or less a sequel to Doc providing the same level of enjoyment. "A Thread of Grace" suffered from my reading it over a period of two and a half months when I had little time to spare in recreational reading. I'd read it at night in short intervals when I went to bed, nonetheless it was another of hers I was sorry to be finishing. Masterly story-telling based on events in wartime Italy, putting the reader in the bomb-shattered towns and the glorious but ominous countryside, tragic events survived somehow by indomitable, real, characters. She is one of my favourite writers and I'm looking forward to fossicking through the rest of her work to choose my next novel to read.

Mary Russell is a talented writer who can make her characters seem real and they are set in historically accurate settings. While I admire this writer, I consider this a dark story because almost everyone is destroyed in the end. It seems like cruel fate in a world with no hope. Since the topic is the persecution of Jews during WWII, it is necessarily a sad and dark story. I disliked the ending because we were not left with any glimmering of hope for a better world. Maybe the only positive thing is that her story helps us to understand the plight of persecuted people anywhere and this is a good thing if we are to make progress in the future.

Excellent review of this era, the cruelty of the Germans toward the Jews, good character development, etc. However, at the beginning of the book there is a list of several groups of characters and locations. I have read historical pieces before that did not require me to check a list to reorient myself to the plot, and this made reading it difficult. For those younger and wiser, that might not be a problem, and the reader would find it well worth the time.

The story is wonderful, although I am only half way through the book. My Italian family is from the particular region(s) in Italy where the story is set. The historical research and nuances in the book are quite accurate and authentic; Ms Russell has the Northern Italian culture down pat in her heart it

seems. i actually come from roots where the surname is both Catholic and Jewish; I also have predecessors who were victims of the mass murders. They were killed either for being Jewish, or hiding them. The author could have helped her story in the following ways: + provided illustrated maps of the villages and regions featured in the story, showing the map of migration + provided a war time pictorial section + provided a very brief historical prologue explaining how all the different political factions came into being. As much as I consider myself a history buff, I found myself doing research elsewhere in the middle of the story To keep myself on track. The author (or quite possibly circumstances) makes it quite difficult to keep names and places straight at times. I'm not sure if this is a function of writing style, but the story can be hard to follow. To make matters a bit more difficult, one character has several name changes out of sheer necessity. I still have half the book before I finish; I'm curling up to read today.

Years ago I visited my relatives in 'the old country' of Northern Italy. They related some WWII events, but their main points were the occupation of the area by all 3 armies, the need to hide themselves and others in basements, barns and caves. I was always interested in reading about that place/time but could never find a book specific to that topic, until I found 'Thread of Grace.' I cannot say enough good things about this book - the characters come alive and the place becomes real. Reading this book does require concentration and referring to the list of characters helps to keep everything straight. This book goes down as one of my favorites...

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